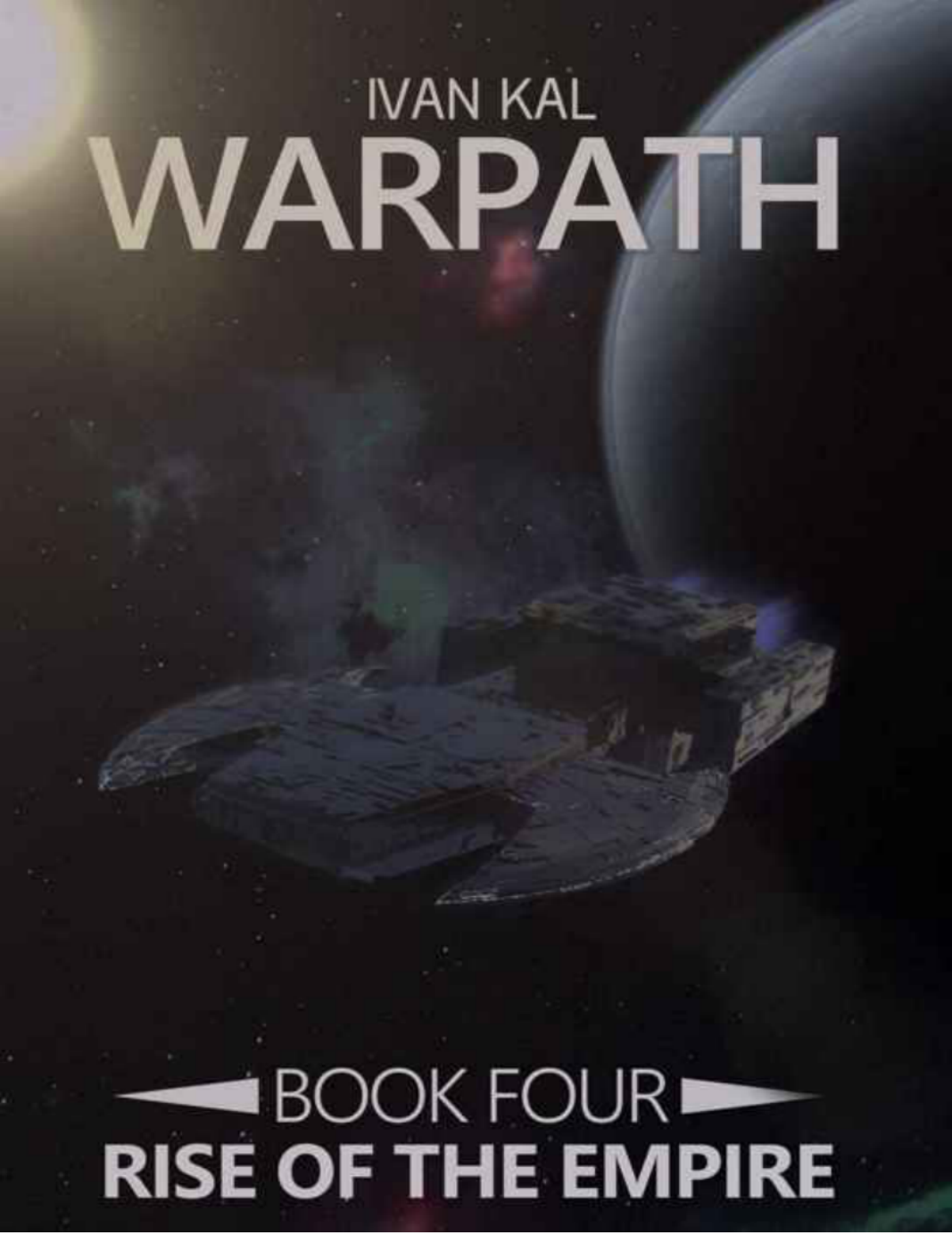
IVAN KAL

WARPATH



BOOK FOUR

RISE OF THE EMPIRE

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Thirty years after the events in the Solar system, the Empire had entered a time of expansion and advancement. Six hundred light years from Earth, humanity starts again. But, their safety and peace are threatened when a hostile force is detected in one of the systems close to the Empire's border.

The Empire needs to prepare for war, and perhaps even strike first in order to protect its people that now include Nel – aliens from the colony world of Nuva.

Other races and other events interfere with the plans, and Emperor Tomas Klein is forced to make decisions that could affect millions.

Adrian Farkas – now leading one of the six Clans of the Empire – prepares his forces for war. New technologies are put to the test. New discoveries and realizations come to the surface as the Empire goes to war.

- Ivan Kal
  - Timeline
  - Prologue
  - Chapter One
  - Chapter Two
  - Chapter Three
  - Chapter Four
  - Chapter Five
  - Chapter Six
  - Chapter Seven
  - Chapter Eight
  - Chapter Nine
  - Chapter Ten
  - Chapter Eleven
  - Chapter Twelve
  - Chapter Thirteen
  - Chapter Fourteen
  - Chapter Fifteen
  - Chapter Sixteen
  - Chapter Seventeen
  - Chapter Eighteen
  - Chapter Nineteen
  - Chapter Twenty
  - Chapter Twenty One
  - Chapter Twenty Two

- Chapter Twenty Three
- Chapter Twenty Four
- Chapter Twenty Five
- Chapter Twenty Six
- Chapter Twenty Seven
- Chapter Twenty Eight
- Chapter Twenty Nine
- Epilogue
- Copyright

Ivan Kal
WARPATH

Timeline

November 2103 – A faction of humanity – Olympus – left to colonize a planet in a star system 600 light years from Earth.

February 2159 – An alien race called the Ra'a'zani conquers Earth.

May 2164 – Olympus arrives at their destination, they name the planet Sanctuary.

March 2170 – Resistance from Earth contacts Olympus on Sanctuary, asking for aid.

January 2172 – Olympus fleet arrives in the Sol system, engaging Ra'a'zani forces in the system. The battle for Earth results in narrow human victory, but the cost is the Earth. Ra'a'zani weapon makes the planet uninhabitable.

March 2172 – Year 1 of the Empire – Tomas Klein leader of Olympus creates the Empire.

Prologue

Year 2164 – Four years before the forming of the Empire – Outer rim of Ra'a'zani space

Ten Ra'a'zani warships dropped out of hyperspace at the hyper-barrier of an inhabited system. The only planet with life in the system was a small water world. Usually the Ra'a'zani didn't bother with worlds that were small and didn't have intelligent life, but the planet in this system was different. The world was a home to a group of scientist from a star empire that Ra'a'zani hadn't encountered yet, the scientists were there conducting studies on the emerging life of the small water world. But Ra'a'zani didn't know that. The only thing that they knew was that another intelligent race had a presence on that world. And that if they capture them, they will learn the locations of their other worlds, and with that a new source of slaves for their Empire.

The ten ships carrying troops to take the station on the surface of the ocean accelerated towards the planet, ignorant of the stations attempts to contact them as the Ra'a'zani communication tech was inferior and unable to even recognize the communication attempt. Hours later they arrived and entered the orbit of the planet, sending troopships down to take the station. The station's weak defenses intended to fight off wildlife on the planet, proved insufficient to defend the station.

Further encouraged by the apparent lower level of the technology from the aliens and the station, the Ra'a'zani landed their troops. The several thousand scientists, having been born and raised in a culture guided by war, blood, and death, fought the Ra'a'zani experienced soldiers. Their defiance cost the Ra'a'zani troops many of their numbers, and caused the deaths of even more of their own. The aliens, even though they were scientist were trained in the combat arts, their race was that of warriors. But even their prowess was insufficient to fight off the Ra'a'zani. They decided to fight to the death, no man or woman would fall into the hands of the enemy. So the scientist fought, taking as many of the Ra'a'zani before dying, ending their own lives if capture was imminent.

And eventually all of the scientists were dead, not one of them was captured. But before their demise they tried to destroy all of their data, computers, and technology. But as such things usually happen, they couldn't destroy it all. The Ra'a'zani got their hands on the data they were looking for, the locations of the aliens other worlds.

With that knowledge in their hands the Ra'a'zani clan responsible for the attack believed that they would bring their race more

resources and more power. But the only thing that they had done was ensure the end of the Ra'a'zani race. But they did not know that yet.

* * *

April; Year 30 of the Empire – Unknown system – Sowir space

Lurker of the Depths walked on to the central hub of his war vessel. His people didn't name the vessels they used to traverse the great void, it was a thing of the ungifted. To his left he noticed one of the tools his people utilized, he pitied the animals sometimes. The animals had been given a great gift, they might not see/hear/sense the Spirit of the Universe like his people did, but they could at least taste it through the means his people were using to control them. But then these animals had always been the tools of his people.

Ever since his people first awakened and became aware of the Spirit of the Universe, when they realized that it allowed them to talk to each other without the use of other primitive, animalistic ways, and then when they learned how to use it to exert their dominance and control over the lower life forms. They had used the tools to take control of their planet, and then as their understanding of the sciences grew they altered their tools to become more efficient.

Now the numbers of their tools outmatched those of his people, and the blend of their technology and their gifts allowed them to control much more of them at the same time. The tools gave his people the means to spread to the stars. To reach out and search for the other secrets of the Spirit. It has been a long time since his people first stepped into the void. He still remembered those times, for his people had long since discovered the means to never ending life. The cost had been the rate of their growth, their reproduction cycles had been greatly reduced, but it was worth it. The universe was going to be theirs.

And then they met with an obstacle. They encountered other life out there in the void. A life that was not from their own world. It was such a glorious occasion for his people, finally they had found someone else to share in the Spirit of the Universe with. But it was not long before his people realized that these others could not see/hear/sense the Spirit of the Universe, they were blind to it. Oh, what a disappointment that was for his people. These were only animals that had somehow learned the secrets of the sciences. His people could read their minds as easily as they could those of the animals. But control and dominance was harder, perhaps because of the level of intelligence that the animals possessed, they were highly resistant to the Spirit.

But they were animals still, no better than the tools his people used. They could not allow it. The animals moved through the stars in the darkness, never truly living, cut off as they were from the Spirit of the Universe and from each other. So his people decided to go to war, because only those who were true beings could be allowed out in the universe. And then they realized what mistake they had made, the animals were powerful, and numerous, the infestation had spread too much for them to cleanse it. His people lost, and were forced to seek an end to the fighting. The animals agreed and eventually even invited his people to their little group, the Consortium.

Lurker of the Depths still remembered the day they accepted, knowing that someday they will rise and finish what they began so long ago. And they did, the Consortium was broken. Most of the animals eradicated save for a few. And the time to finish one of the last of the ungifted was now. The ungifted animals had a name in their primitive ways of communication for the world, but Lurker of the Depths never bothered to learn them, it was such a pain, trying to translate the ungifted primitive communication into true speech.

He couldn't imagine being like them, unable to see/hear/sense the Spirit of the Universe. Not being able to communicate with others of his kind through the Spirit. He could exchange complex ideas in fractions of time it took the ungifted to even begin trying to explain themselves. He could share in the life experiences of any of his kind, if they allowed. The ungifted could never know another being as he could. There were no lies among his kind, no secrets.

Lurker of the Depths moved on his three legs to the center of the hub, he placed his slender frame into the capsule that would enhance his gift and let him use the tools to guide his vessel as he wished. He watched as his vessel left the other-space, and exited into an empty system from which his people will stage the invasion to the last free world of the animals.

He watched as ships started appearing beside his own, first dozens, then hundreds. It would take time for the full fleet to assemble from all the corners of their dominion. An invasion takes a long time to plan, and more than just the war vessels. They needed support, fuel, and extra ammunition, all of that was required. But once all were here, their invasion fleet will be the largest his people had ever assembled. First, they will cleanse the remnants of the Consortium, then they will move after the other ungifted.

* * *

Adjunct Michael Jorgenson sat at his station on board the Jinn.

The Jinn was a patrol ship, capable of trans-travel, fast and lightly armed. It was one of fifteen patrol ships that patrolled the Empire's border with the Sowir Dominion. The border itself stretched across multiple systems, and while it was extremely hard for anyone to actually keep a border in space, the systems that were patrolled were closest to the Sowir controlled systems, and were most suitable as staging points for an attack. The Jinn was traveling through the mostly empty system, aside from a small refueling station, dozen or so sensor drones, and two planets orbiting a red dwarf, there was nothing else of interest in the system.

The system was four light years away from the Nuva system, the capital system of the Nuvan Clan. And presumably the first place the Sowir would attack. The non-aggression agreement between the Empire and the Sowir had been in effect for thirty years. And in that time no Sowir Dominion ship was seen past the agreed border line. Empire's exploration ships had likewise stayed out of the Dominion space. Focusing their explorations on the star systems that were rimward from Sanctuary, in other words towards the outer rim of the galaxy. While Sowir territory spread coreward from Sanctuary, towards the galactic core, when using Sanctuary as a reference point, which all the Empire's maps did.

Jinn had a small crew of fifteen. The patrol class ships were small, they have been made for the long term patrols with most of the cargo space inside them delegated to fuel and supplies. Which allowed them to operate for long periods of time without the need to return to base. They were around a hundred meters long, and shaped like a one-sided knife blade.

Michael looked over the sensory data that the Jinn received from many sensor drones in system and from the surrounding systems through their FTL comms, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. He was just about to get up and grab something to eat when an alert flashed on his screen.

Michael leaned closer and saw that something had triggered the emergency protocols in one of their sensor drones, in a system about fourteen light years away. Swiping with his hand Michael brought up the scans. After a mere few seconds of looking at them he swallowed hard and commed his Ship Master.

"Ship Master, you need to get up to the command, there is something you need to see right away."

Chapter One

May; Year 30 of the Empire – Sanctuary

Elias Bakas sat and watched the meeting between the Clan Leaders of the Empire and the Emperor, although to them he was just a faceless figure. One of many such figures throughout the Empire. Elias was now the leader of the Hand of the Empire, an organization that was tasked with protecting the people of the Empire and enforcing the letter and the spirit of the Empire's laws. In order to do that, no agent of the Hand ever showed his or her face.

Their uniform was a black armor suit and a dark blue coat over it, the coat had the symbol of the Hand of the Empire on the back, a metal hand with an eye on its back. Their helmets completely covered their heads, and the face plate was smooth save for a thin horizontal silver line across the eyes. The only place where an agent could walk freely and interact with other people was on Sanctuary, in their sanctum. And that was the sacrifice that every member of the Hand made, so that they could be as bias as possible, and to eliminate things like corruption and bribery. No person in the Empire could ever be sure that they had talked to the same agent more than once, their voices were modulated and all sounded the same. And Elias made sure that all agent's rotate around the Empire.

But their isolation also posed a problem, people could come to distrust them, even hate them as they went around the Empire punishing those that betrayed the Codes of the Empire. In order to counter that, Elias made sure that the Hand of the Empire wasn't seen just as enforcers of the law, but also as someone the people can rely on and trust. The Hand helped new colonies in their infant stages by providing help to the workforce, even though back then there weren't that many of them, it was their presence that mattered. The Hand helped with relief efforts on colonies struck by disasters, and they made themselves available to the people, anyone could ask for the Hand to investigate if they felt their rights were being harmed.

The Hand of the Empire had the trust of the people, and that was extremely important, considering the scope of their power, influence, and purpose. The Hand of the Empire had great power in the Empire, they were the Emperor's failsafe. The Emperor wielded absolute power over all clans. The Clan Leaders had many liberties, they set the policies of their worlds and they could even make new laws, as long as those laws didn't violate the codes. But the Emperor had the last word on everything, the fact that he rarely exercised that right didn't take away from the fact that he could very easily become a tyrannical dictator. And Emperor Klein was fully aware of that. The Hand of the

Empire was created as a check on his power, and on power of every Clan Leader.

When the Empire was founded humanity was in a very fragile place. With most of the human population dead on Earth, strict reproduction laws were enforced, there were only about ten million humans left at a time. The new laws made sure that every able woman donated her eggs twice a year, just like men were required to donate their seed. The eggs were then artificially inseminated, and placed into artificial wombs. The laws worked, and in thirty years the human population had reached two hundred million. The Nel population of Nuva that had joined the Empire was exempt from the law during the first five years after the Empire's founding, until the geneticists managed to create the immortality treatment for them.

The Nel population in the Empire now almost equaled that of the human population. The Empire's population was now close to four hundred million, not even close to the numbers humanity or Nel once had, but still much more than what they had thirty years ago. Although most of that number were children, the last decade saw a significant increase in every area of the Empire, as the children born in the first ten years of the Empire grew up and finished their education. The Empire had worked hard to keep up with the growth, at times barely managing to follow.

Now the Empire had sixteen colonized systems, including Sanctuary, and it consisted out of six clans. The six Clan Leaders met on Sanctuary in person twice a year, at the end and the middle of the year, to discuss various matters concerning the Empire with the Emperor. The last thirty years had been peaceful, which fuelled their expansion efforts greatly.

An exchange at the table made Elias focus on what was being said.

"Terran Clan needs more resources! The tidal season on the New Earth is coming soon, and we need to adequately prepare!" Clan Leader of the Terran Clan Barbara Brown demanded.

"The yearly allotted resource quota for your Clan was more than enough to cover your projected needs." Clan Leader Annbjörg Johansson of Clan Gudólfr said as she turned and looked pointedly at Clan Leader Brown.

"The projected quota is obviously not enough, if this council had taken into account the harsh realities of New Earth's climate we would have been allotted enough resources!" Clan Leader Brown said bitterly.

"You know full well that those words aren't true. We had discussed this in cooperation with your people and reached the conclusion about your quota. Your Clan is one at fault, this is the

second year in a row that your Clan is requesting resources above your allotted quota. If you need more resources, then you should use next year's quota to increase your own material gathering and processing." Clan Leader Johansson said.

Clan Leader Brown's face tightened. "We had to use our own resources to finish facilities for the new generation scheduled to be born in two months."

"Don't play with us now Barbara, I have reviewed the data you submitted to the council and your own records, you increased the progeny in the centers by forty percent. It is your own fault, you should have followed the plan you submitted. And that it is without taking into account three defense platforms you built. You wasted precious resources on those platforms and now you are short." Johansson said.

"My people need to feel safe! Those platforms are necessary! And as for the progeny programs, we had to make adjustments, my peoples population is too small!" Brown said.

"You know full well that the Second Fleet is just a day away by trans-lane. Any threat to your people would be met long before they could reach you, if any such threat even existed, and it doesn't. Scout ships have explored the entire fifty light year range around the Empire's borders. You need to grow your Clan's infrastructure before you spend resources on things you don't need!" Johansson retorted.

"The Second Fleet? We don't want to rely on anyone! Protection of our people should be ours alone!" Brown said, standing up and raising her voice. Clan Leader Johansson stood up to respond.

"Enough!" The voice of the Emperor, Tomas Klein rang out. Immediately the two Clan Leaders sat back down and quieted. The Emperor turned to Clan Leader Barbara Brown, "There is no 'your' or 'my' people. There is only **our** people. We are all part of the Empire. You and the rest of the survivors from Earth made the choice to join the Empire, you could have taken my other offer and went your way with enough supplies to start on your own. You didn't, you chose to join us and benefit from the Empire's resources, which means that you need to follow the same rules as the other Clans." He paused, all the while looking Clan Leader Brown directly in the eyes, not letting her turn away.

Then after a bit he continued. "Sanctuary will send additional resources from our own supplies. But, if this happens again… Well, that would mean that you are not capable of guiding your Clan, and by Empire's law a Clan Leader needs to provide for his or her people foremost, and I am sure that the Hand of the Empire will have no choice but to interfere." Emperor said calmly.

Clan Leader Brown glanced at Elias who was sitting on the other

side of the rectangular table, across from Tomas who was sitting at its head. Elias didn't respond, just kept his head turned in the Clan Leader Brown's general direction. He saw a glimmer of fear in her eyes, she knew what had happened to her predecessor. Clan Leader John Reiner was the first leader of the Terran Clan, which consisted mainly out of those that the Second Fleet managed to rescue from Earth.

Their introduction to the Empire had a lot of problems, the people that were rescued had been slaves to an alien race. In most cases they lacked education and even basic knowledge of who they really were. They spent ten years just learning about humanity. There were a few among them that were old enough to remember a time before Earth was conquered, few of those were even people that were alive when Olympus was still on Earth, as they went through life extension treatments before they lost the knowledge of how to do it in the Great War.

Quickly those older individuals started influencing the others, essentially placing themselves in the roles of the leaders of the survivors. John Reiner decided to join the Empire even with the many different philosophies and principles between the survivors and the Empire. The Emperor had the survivors vote for their leader, and unsurprisingly John Reiner was selected.

The Emperor then allowed them to colonize a planet. The first six months went by quietly, and then the season of increased tidal activity came. Clan Leader John Reiner had ignored the surveys and started the colony on the spot unsuitable for it. The storms and earthquakes hit them hard, and five hundred people died, with many more injured. Reiner tried to hide the fact that it was his fault by altering reports and falsifying survey data.

The Hand was dispatched to aid in the relief and rescue, and to investigate what exactly happened. Quickly they uncovered what Reiner had done, which turned out to be much worse that simply choosing a poor place for the colony. He had used most of the resources allotted for building safe and comfortable homes for the colonists to build a luxurious 'presidential' building for himself and his closest supporters.

Seeing the evidence, the highest ranking Hand agent on the planet had no choice, their duty was to protect the people. The agent in charge broadcasted the evidence to every citizen of the Empire, and then executed John Reiner on the spot. It was the first time that the Hand of the Empire truly showed the full extent of their authority in the Empire. Up until then they had been seen as something a bit more than police, they aided in starting new colonies, and they settled disputes between regular people when law keepers of a Clan were

insufficient. And in that one moment, everyone realized what the Hand of the Empire truly was. They served no one, and everyone. They protected the people from those who abused their power.

The people understood then. The Hand was the symbol of what the Empire was. They watched and protected the Empire from those who would break its most important code. Every citizen of the Empire had its protection. Clan Leader John Reiner had knowingly endangered his people, he failed them. And the Hand punished him for it.

Finally, Barbara turned her eyes back to the Emperor. “I apologize. People of my clan are afraid. We do not want to see history repeat itself, which is why we were a bit overzealous in our efforts. Having those platforms in space gives us peace of mind.”

Emperor nodded in understanding. “I will see about having some ships placed in your system until you are able to build your own. But, the Terran Clan needs to understand that we are not like the Earth, what you did here is exactly what politicians back there would have done. You spent your resources on one thing, neglecting things that you needed for the safety of the people, knowing that we would have granted you more than your allotted share if it meant the safety of the people. You played politics when you didn’t have to. And I will not allow the Empire to become that. If you wanted to accelerate your Clan growth, all you had to do was say so at the last council meeting.”

Clan Leader Brown lowered her eyes. “I… I know, it won’t happen again.” She said.

“Good. Let’s move on to the next agenda.” Emperor Tomas Klein said.

They spent another three hours dealing with various other matters. Clan Gudólfr had achieved self-sufficiency, meaning it no longer needed help from Sanctuary and other self-sufficient systems to grow. That left only two Clans that were still reliant on outside help, Clan Kazalir and the Terran Clan. The other three self-sufficient Clans were the Nuvan Clan, Clan Dai Ven, and Clan Warpath. And out of those three only Clan Dai Ven and the Nuvan Clan were actively involved in expanding their territory to other systems. The Nuvan Clan held four star systems, while Clan Dai Ven held five, and Sanctuary as the capitol system of the Empire held three more systems. Clan Warpath was more focused on their one system, and their Clan was the most unique. Their system was basically one enormous asteroid field that orbited the star. That gave them the greatest well of resources, seeing as the asteroid field was extremely rich in ore.

Finally the meeting came to an end, and the Emperor dismissed everyone. The Clan Leaders stood up and slowly made their way out

of the room. Elias stood up as well and started towards the doors, but before leaving he glanced back at the Emperor, only to see him studying him in return. Elias hadn't spoken with his friend since he accepted to lead the Hand of the Empire thirty years ago, not as Elias anyway. He wondered if Tomas knew that it was he who sat through the meeting with him today. Elias turned and left the room, he had a lot of work to do.

Chapter Two

Adrian Farkas Reiss, Clan Leader of the Clan Warpath walked out of the Council meeting. As soon as he exited the room his guard stepped in behind him. Two figures dressed in Warpath clan's battle suits and two massive beasts Sora and Akash, the wolions, animal native to Sanctuary that Adrian adopted when they were just born. The two animals were 700 kg of muscle, claws, and teeth, they had heads that looked a little bit like those of a wolf, though fatter and wider like a cat, with the nostrils higher on the snout, their teeth were more like that of a cat than those of a wolf. Their bodies were thick and powerful. They were about the size of a very large lion from Earth, but about a third heavier thanks to their denser muscles and bones which they developed from Sanctuary's slightly higher gravity.

"Where to now boss?" Clara Bengtsdotter asked on their private network, Adrian heard her voice through his implant.

"The Emperor wants to speak with me privately." Adrian responded via his implant. Immediately he heard his other guard, Meifeng Zhao groan as she brought one of her hands up to her helmet making a shoot me through the head gesture with her fingers.

"Great, that means more door-guard duty." Meifeng said.

Adrian couldn't help but be amused. His guards were two of the best warriors Warpath had to offer, and they were also complete opposites of each other. Meifeng was short and lean, while Clara was tall and heavily built. But each had risen to the top of Warpath's warriors. Both of them were Sentinels, the elite of Clan Warpath.

Adrian's Clan was a lot different than the others. When Adrian's proposal got sent to the Emperor (without his knowledge) it was just an exercise that he was doing in his spare time. He tried to imagine and plan out a society that was very different than anything that they had previously. He still drew from a lot of older cultures and societies. But in the end he created something new.

The main difference from the other Clan's was that Warpath didn't have its own progeny centers. No one was born into Clan Warpath, one had to pass certain tests before he or she was accepted. There were still natural births in Warpath of course, but the children born of Warpath members weren't really a part of the Clan until they reached maturity and passed the tests. If they failed, they would be sent to Sanctuary or some other Clan, and they had the option of not even taking the tests and simply leaving, with the option of taking the test later in life, if that was their wish. That was why Clan Warpath had a lot less people, their population was barely twenty five thousand, spread across three asteroid habitats.

Clan Warpath was a clan of warriors. Every member of the clan, from the technicians to scientists and fleet personnel was also a warrior. Proficient in at least one area of warfare, as well as martial arts. Adrian wanted to create a society of warrior philosophers, people who were smart and wise. And now when they didn't have to worry about old age, it was possible to achieve that. He didn't want soldiers or armies, but specialists and leaders. People who could adapt to any situation. Ultimately, he wanted to create a group of people who were so formidable that they could be considered armies in themselves.

There were of course some problems. Not everyone is capable of reaching such heights, that is why he made Warpath a clan that accepted new people only if they were worthy. Having someone born into the clan didn't guarantee that they had what it takes to become what he envisioned. He gave them all an opportunity to be unique. The goal of Warpath was to push the boundaries of human capabilities, to push their physical limits to the edge, to perfect the art of war, and explore every warrior path.

They arrived at their destination, Clara and Meifeng stopped at the door, along with Akash. Adrian and Sora entered. The room was furnished with furniture that was brought from Earth when Olympus left, wooden chairs, bookshelves with paper books, fabric carpets. To anyone who wasn't born on Earth this room would look extremely strange, antiquated. Emperor Tomas Klein sat behind his big desk at the far end of the room, and as Adrian and Sora entered he stood up and came around to meet them.

"Adrian." Tomas said as he reached them and offered his hand. Adrian reached out to shake it. In the past thirty years Adrian and Tomas got to know each other well, as they worked closely in building Warpath, and had become friends. After shaking his hand, Tomas reached over and scratched Sora behind the ears, immediately she released a sound that would scare anyone who didn't know her. But this wasn't the first time Tomas was in the presence of a wolion, and he knew that the sound was wolions equivalent of purring.

Tomas gestured at the two sofas to the side and they moved to sit there, Sora finding a spot on the ground close to Adrian's feet.

"How are things, with Warpath I mean?" Tomas asked. Adrian raised an eyebrow at the question.

"Fine, things are progressing according to the plans." Adrian answered.

"Good, good." Tomas said distracted. "I see that you added another aspect to your mantle since we last saw each other." Tomas commented, looking at the back of Adrian's hand. Adrian put both his arms in front of himself, with the back of the hands turned upwards, looking at the intricate tattoos drawn there.

His left hand held three black circles, each with a different symbol inside. Stylish lines and arcs in different colors connected each circle to the other two. His right hand also held three circles with symbols. Each circle had small orbs tattooed close to them. Each of the symbols represented a learned aspect, an area in which the wearer of the tattoos was proficient in, and the small orbs represented the level of their proficiency.

Over the course of his life Adrian had learned six aspects, leadership, hand to hand, weapons, fleet command, ground command, and history. Adrian was most proficient in hand to hand and fleet command aspects, so those symbols had the most orbs tattooed around the circle, both had six orbs. While his weapons had five, leadership three, ground command two, and history one. His symbols were also black in color, signifying that his main focus was in the combat paths. Other people had different colored symbols, according to their main focus.

The idea of tattoos came from a few of Warpath citizens who first got them as a way to mark their progress, the practice then spread until it was officially adopted. The location and the appearance differed from person to person. Some chose to place the marks on their shoulders or chest, some even on their face. Each chose a different way to fill the space in between the symbols and orbs, Adrian saw one soldier whose mark was a tree, symbols hanged like fruits from the branches. In time the marks would grow as people learned more and more, especially now that most would live long lives.

It was a Warpath thing, something that showed that in just thirty years they had managed to create their own culture and customs.

“Yes, I finally had the time to spare and learn more.” Adrian said.

“That’s good, one should never stop learning.” Tomas said distracted. Adrian looked closely at Tomas, and then he noticed that Sora had raised her head from the floor where she had been napping, and that she was looking at Tomas. Adrian too studied Tomas. Sora had felt something which meant that he could too. The wolions were highly intelligent, and empathic. Adrian had realized it a long time ago, when he caught Akash and Sora using their ability on him. And over the past thirty years the two animals spent almost all of their time with him, over time the two wolions learned to project the feelings of others to Adrian, letting him feel them for himself. It was one thing that Adrian never told to anyone, except Iris. It was his secret weapon. And now Sora was projecting Tomas’ emotions to him.

Tomas was feeling trepidation, but there was also an undertone of fear, nervousness, and hesitation.

“Why did you really want to speak with me?” Adrian asked.

Tomas got up and walked to the window, looking out at the city.

After a minute he turned to Adrian and spoke.

"The Sowir are on the move." He said.

Immediately Adrian stood, "They broke the pact?"

Tomas shook his head sadly, "No. But they have a staging point in a system on their border, close to Nelus, and are gathering forces there. We believe they plan to finally finish them off."

Adrian's brow furrowed with concern, "But how do we know – Oh… We broke the pact didn't we? We have assets inside their territory."

"Yes. We had to make sure that they weren't going to break their word. I know that it sounds hypocritical, but we had no choice. We only sent unmanned stealth drones to monitor their systems."

"Did they find out?" Adrian asked.

"We have no reason to believe that they have, we had the drones moving through their territory for more than a decade. No, it's likely that they just decided to take care of Nelus."

Adrian narrowed his eyes. "There is more isn't there?"

"The force that they gathered is big Adrian, a thousand warships with more arriving every day. Plus the support ships." Tomas said slowly.

"A thousand?" Adrian said shocked, the Empire had nine hundred warships in its Fleets, not counting the support ships, with them the number was more like a thousand and two hundred. And also not counting the Clan guard's, but even with them the number wasn't much bigger. But a lot of that number would need to be set aside for defense, the Empire would never be able to attack with such large number.

"And we know they have more. These ships are coming from the heart of their territory, the ships they have guarding our border are still there." Tomas said, "We believe that this force was gathered specifically to finish off Nelus."

"And Nelus? How many ships do they have to defend themselves with?"

"Eight hundred and fifty warships, but four hundred of those are retrofitted merchant ships or their new cruiser class. Which according to everything we managed to learn about it is far inferior to their other ships. Its poorly made, the council cut corners everywhere it could."

"I assume that this information comes from Clan Dai Ven and Clan Leader Jusan?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, there are a few people on Nelus that he kept in contact with, covertly of course."

"Do they know about Sowir?"

"Jusan relayed a message to his contacts, whether they will

believe it or not is another thing. But there is nothing we can do about them, we need to decide what to do about the Sowir." Tomas said.

"Why didn't you bring this up during the council meeting?"

"Because there wasn't the need yet, it will take Sowir months if not years to conquer Nelus system, not counting the months it will take them to get there. And the Clans have very little to offer, the Clan guard was never intended to protect the Empire, that's what the fleet is there for."

"What does Laura think?" Adrian asked. His adoptive mother Laura Reiss was in charge of the Empire's space fleet.

"Both Laura and the Hand suggest preemptive strike." Tomas said.

"Really? Our ships are better, but do we even know how many ships Sowir have?"

"An estimate only. The preliminary plans are not for us attacking them head on, we would use our advantage over them, the trans-lanes, to attack their less defended systems cutting their numbers, and shipbuilding capability down."

"Sounds like you already have a plan. If you didn't tell the other Clan Leaders, why are you telling me?" Adrian asked.

Tomas looked Adrian in the eye. "I need to know the status of your fleet."

"You know that already, we are sending the Warpath guard reports monthly to Sanctuary Fleet Headquarters." Adrian said.

"What I meant to ask is: What is the status of your other fleet." Tomas said, looking at Adrian gravely.

"So you know about that?"

"There is little that the Hand of the Empire keeps from me." Tomas simply said.

"Well, I didn't really think they wouldn't tell you in any case." Adrian smiled. "So why do you ask?"

"There is another version of the plan, one that involves Nelus. But we are not sure that we can do it with our numbers. If your fleet is everything I heard it is, perhaps we could do it."

Adrian sighed and shook his head. "The ships aren't ready yet… Probably won't be for years. We are still developing technologies for them."

"I was under the impression that they were operational?" Tomas asked.

Adrian grimaced. "They are technically… most of them can move, but there is still a lot of work to be done. These ships are still being built, and we are using methods vastly different than the Fleet. They are modular, with the capability to be upgraded as we wish easily. And we laid ground work in them for technologies that we simply

don’t have or haven’t perfected yet. And even what we put in them now is just so that we can run tests. Hell, two of the ships don’t even have their hulls completed.”

“How long would it take to make the fleet battle worthy?” Tomas asked.

Adrian didn’t respond immediately, the fleet had been his baby almost since the founding of Warpath. He has been working on it for the past twenty years, more even if he counted the designs and planning. “Two years, one at the minimum.” Adrian said, “But before I even consider committing the fleet I need to know your plan. My fleet isn’t like the others Tomas, it is… Specialized.”

“Of course, let me tell you what we have come up with, and you can then tell me what you think…” Tomas said. They spent the next hour talking, and then Adrian went to his home on Sanctuary, he would need to rest for tomorrow.

Chapter Three

Hyeon Seo-yun, Sanctuary's Minister of Science walked through the Emperor's palace after another hard day's work. She was exhausted, she spent half of the day on the southern continent because they had a problem in one of their field research stations, and she needed to be there in person. And the other half of the day she spent in her lab in Olympus City, working on the same project she did for the past thirty years. The alien sphere, or as it turned out, not so alien. The sphere that the Nel Councilmember Jusan – now Clan Leader of the Clan Dai Ven – brought with him when he 'defected' to the Empire was in fact a highly sophisticated data container left on the Nel home planet by both the Nel and human ancestor, Axull Darr.

It came as a bit of a shock when they found out that the human and Nel races were in fact engineered. It wasn't like they were made as a completely new life form, Axull Darr used most of his genetics – that of the race that simply called itself the People – to make them, in a way they were his children. And he did it in such a way that even with all of their technology they hadn't realized it until they knew where to look. Presumably Axull Darr found suitable planets that already had life, and altered the organisms on them, imprinting the DNA of what would later become the human and Nel race, so that it would take hundreds of thousands if not even millions of years until they became what Axull Darr imagined.

He made two other races beside the humans, the Nel and one more that they hadn't encountered yet. For all they knew the third race never had the chance to evolve into intelligent beings. Nel and humans on the other hand managed to evolve and survive. The brilliance of what Axull Darr did was not lost on Seo-yun. She would often tell Tomas that humanity's greatest strength was their genetic knowledge, but compared to the father of their race it was nothing. Axull Darr managed to imprint a highly advanced and compressed DNA into a less evolved life forms, to change them and lay out an evolutionary path for them to follow, while he also took into consideration the environment that the organism would evolve in. He made sure that his genetic programing would allow for evolutionary variation, and that was most apparent in the DNA of Nel and humans.

They were closely related, their foundation was the same, but their home planets shaped them differently. Humans had lost their tails long ago, while Nel tails remained. Human eyes were different than Nel, who could see a lot better at night, their night vision coming on almost instantly when they went from light to dark. Their strange eyes with many small pupils that constantly shifted were in fact

secondary eyelids that were highly reflective, giving them their superior night vision. But their vision was overall worse than that of humans. Their eyes had less focus, they didn't have peripheral vision, and they saw everything in the direction their eyes were turned in at the same clarity. Human eyes on the other hand were much sharper, at least at the point they were focusing on, and able to see a greater range of the visual spectrum.

Nel were almost color blind, an effect of evolving in the caves of their home planet. And when they finally left their caves they were met with the bleak skies that blocked almost all of their sun's radiation, resulting in them having pale gray skin. Humanity on the other hand evolved on the world were developing different defenses against solar radiation was a necessity.

There were other differences of course, Nel claws for example, a leftover from a time when they had to have strong and sharp tools to open hard shelled fruits that grew on their world and hunt smaller animals. Their mentality was also different, humanity was shaped by struggle, and later war. While Nel evolved at the top of their planet's food chain with no competition. Humanity had to claw its way to the top of the food chain. But none of these differences were so big that they could deny what the sphere and the computer representation of Axull Darr told them. They were the same race, or rather sub races of the original race, the People.

When they let their people know the truth, it wasn't as big of a problem as they first anticipated. The people accepted it, once sufficient proof was given. Things changed of course, what it meant to be human didn't. Religion adapted, it became much more adept at doing that since they left Earth. The hand of God worked through Axull Darr, the core values of different religions stayed the same. People accepted and moved on.

And the sphere whispered of knowledge unlike anything they could imagine. But the program that kept the knowledge, while in some ways not as advanced as an Ai, and in some far more so, was not stupid. When it came in contact with humans, its higher functions unlocked, as per its programing in the event that the separated races find each other.

It realized that Nel had found the sphere by accident, and that humans haven't found the sphere on their home world, nor possessed the technology to hear the sphere's beacon. So it refused to give them technologies that they didn't possess, but it did agree to share the knowledge it had on technologies that the Empire already possessed. It broadened and reaffirmed the knowledge they had, which in turn usually led to them inventing new things on their own. In a way Seo-yun preferred it that way. It made their advances more valid

somehow. The knowledge wasn't given to them, it was earned.

Seo-yun reached her and Tomas' quarters and entered slowly, Tomas was probably already asleep and she didn't want to wake him. As she made her way across the living room towards the bedroom, she noticed a light coming from the direction of Tomas' private office. Seo-yun sighed and made her way to the light.

"Still awake?" Seo-yun asked when she entered the room.

Tomas swung his head to the door startled for a moment, and then after he realized it was Seo-yun his head turned back to the screens projected above his table. He glanced at them for a moment and then he leaned back into his chair, rubbing his eyes with his left hand. "I didn't realize what time it is." Tomas said.

"So, what is keeping you from sleep now?" Seo-yun asked.

"Sowir." Tomas said seriously, "Ships are still arriving at their staging system. And not only warships, there are transports, support ships, repair ships. They plan on sieging Nelus."

"We always knew that they would do that."

"Yes… I thought that with our fabricating technology we could out manufacture them, but those numbers mean that we are still behind them. Our projections put their remaining forces at around two hundred ships at the point we arrived in this region. Their border worlds are protected by one hundred and sixty ships, and the fleet they are amassing already numbers more than a thousand. That means that their production is at least fifty percent larger than ours, if not more. We have no way of knowing what they have deeper in their territory. Not to mention what we now know they really are."

"Our technology does give us an edge. But remember that they had most of the infrastructure of the Consortium, that's dozens of worlds. Not to mention anything that the Sowir built in secret in their territory before they started the war, or maybe even outside it. Their industrial base was far larger than ours. Thirty years ago we were two systems, now we have sixteen and our industry grows by the day, as does our work force." Seo-yun said.

Tomas nodded, "I know, but I also know that as soon as Sowir deal with Nelus they will start planning their attack on us."

"Again, we knew that already. And even with their greater numbers, they have very little chance of taking us now, our technology has advanced, even with what we know about their genetic knowledge, our shipbuilding capabilities are such that we could replace any losses much faster than they could. What is really bothering you Tomas." Seo-yun said.

Tomas looked her in the eyes, "The 'why' bothers me Seo-yun." Tomas said.

"'The Why'?"

“Yes.” Tomas nodded gravely, “Why are they doing this? There is no sense in anything that the “Sowir” do. Their first incident with the Consortium could be looked at as an isolated incident. As far as we are aware it was their first contact with alien life. So they attacked, perhaps they were frightened to discover a life form so different than them, and then when the Consortium showed its power they changed gears, asked for peace and eventually joined the Consortium. They prospered and grew, and then they turned on the other four races. Why? There was no reason, I looked over the records from that period there was nothing to set them off, they just attacked for no reason. They refused to communicate for years, decades. They just killed anyone in their way.” Tomas shook his head.

“And then we come along, we had better ships, better technology, we protected one Nel colony. They knew nothing about us other than that we defeated their forces in a battle. And they had records of that battle, they knew that our ships were better, but not by that much. So we send ships to their system trying to intimidate them, hoping to open talks. And what do they do?” He asked.

Then continued talking. “They accept our terms, no negotiating no nothing. Any sane being would have tried to learn more about this new opponent, tried to negotiate and make a deal that was more favorable for them. And they didn’t, everything we know indicates that they followed our agreement to the letter, they didn’t even try to infiltrate our territory, to learn how much of a threat we truly were. We had only one system then, two if we count Nuva, if they just tried to learn something they would have known that we weren’t a threat then.” Tomas shook his head. “It makes no sense. Why? Why, would they accept and then keep their word? The fleet they are amassing now to attack Nelus tells me that they were far more powerful than we initially thought. So tell me why didn’t they fight us on the treaty? Why did they agree so readily?”

“I don’t know Tomas.” Seo-yun said, “They are alien, we can’t possibly understand their motives.”

Tomas grimaced, “Nel are alien,” Seo-yun started to say something, but Tomas kept going, “Yes, we and Nel are related, I will give you that. But, what about Guxcacul and Mtural? Their survivors live in the Empire now, as citizens. We have much in common with them, and while they are alien, we understand each other. The four Consortium races lived in peace for hundreds of years. So why are Sowir so different?”

“You are right, but we have much more in common with Guxcacul and Mtural than with the Sowir. Both Guxcacul and Mtural communicate using sounds, they can both perceive light, both can see and hear. We have no idea how the Sowir perceive the world around

them. For all we know their perception of the world is so different than ours, so alien, that we might never understand them. You need to realize that you might never get the answer to your question."

"So what? We are destined to go to war with them? If we can't make a lasting peace, something other than this non-aggression treaty, then it will come down to that."

"Even if you could make peace, would you?" Seo-yun asked. Tomas looked at her confused.

"Of course I would!"

"Truly? You know that you can't trust their word. They lived as part of the Consortium for a long time before they struck. They could do the same with us. This non-aggression pact we have with them will last only for as long as they want it to. You know that they will attack us. We might not be able to understand their decisions, but we can anticipate them from their past actions. They will attack us."

"So even if we make peace it will last only until they gather enough strength to attack us." Tomas said raising his eyes to look at the ceiling.

"Most likely." Seo-yun said.

Tomas remained silent for a while, Seo-yun studied him. She saw a leader and Emperor, thinking, trying to find a path for his people. Finally, he turned and looked at her. "I made a vow Seo-yun." He said, and the tone of his voice made Seo-yun shiver.

"I promised to myself and every being in the Empire that I will protect them. That I will never allow what happened to Earth to happen to us. I swore that we will never again be weak, that I will never allow our people to disappear from this Universe." Seo-yun watched him as his expression turned hard. "I will not let Sowir be a threat to us." The finality in his words made Seo-yun uneasy, but she believed in Tomas, the man she loved. She believed that he would do anything to protect his people, human or otherwise.

Chapter Four

Jun; Year 30 – Warpath system

The small ship arrived in Warpath system with a small burst of violet light as it exited the trans-lane from Waypoint system. Adrian sat on the bridge of his small transport ship, looking at the holo of the system he was the leader of. Warpath system was an enormous asteroid belt, or field, orbiting the system's sun. The Empire's best scientists were stumped to explain how the belt was formed, but all agreed that it once had planets, and that something catastrophic occurred that resulted in the planets destruction and the creation of the asteroid belt.

Whatever it was that caused it happened a long time ago. Now this system was the perfect place for his Clan, and what he wanted it to become. The holo showed the entirety of the Warpath system, even though the light from it still hadn't reached the ship. The ship's sensors gathered the information gathered by many passive sensor platforms scattered throughout the system. The small platforms constantly relayed their sensory data to every ship, station, or habitat in the system by FTL comms. A few seconds after Adrian's ship exited the trans-space they received a challenge, which Adrian's pilot answered, immediately after they were cleared to enter move towards the Warpath habitats. The challenge came from a massive asteroid battle station that guarded Warpath's only incoming trans-station.

The Empire had two ways of traveling faster than light, hyperspace – which currently allowed their ships to move at around 30 times faster than the speed of light; and trans-travel. Traveling by using trans-space was much faster and very different than by using hyperspace. The only thing that ships need to do in order to enter hyperspace was to be far enough away from the star's gravity influence, usually that was on the outskirts of a star system. To travel via trans-space, a ship first needed to find a trans-station. An area in space which was filled with what they called trans-particles, then project a sufficiently powerful trans-field onto the area in order to enter a trans-lane, the strength of the trans-field depended on the mass of the objects inside the trans-station. And the required field strength increased exponentially based on mass.

As far as they knew, trans-lanes were a natural occurrence, completely random, and could only be used to travel in a single direction. That is why relative to the system they were in they could be either incoming or outgoing. The trans-space that connected to points in space was called a trans-lane, and the two points trans-stations. Trans-lanes were similar to the theoretical wormholes.

Warpath had two outgoing, and one incoming trans-station. It was also one of the more rare systems, in that it had connection both to and from another system. The system that it was connected to was Waypoint system, which was under control of clan Dai Ven, the trade center of the Empire. The Waypoint system was what they had come to call a hub. A system that had many trans-lanes, Waypoint had nine outgoing, and eleven incoming trans-stations.

This placed it in perfect position, as most movements through the empire had to go through Waypoint. It also had two way connection to two other systems, Warpath and Sanctuary. Travel time through a trans-lane also wasn't bound by distance, meaning that sometimes the travel time for a shorter lane was longer than that through a longer lane. Travel time from Warpath to Sanctuary which was some sixty light years away was about thirty seven hours, counting the travel in normal space through Waypoint, from the Warpath's trans-station to the Sanctuary's.

A few minutes after Adrian's ship entered the Warpath system, they arrived to their destination. Adrian watched on the holo, as his ship approached three big asteroids tethered to each other by massive cables, and held in orbits around each other by gravity generators. The three asteroids together made up Warpath's only city, and they didn't have names exactly, they were more like different districts of one city. Forge district, where most of Warpath's production facilities were, Residential district where all of their living quarters, shops, and entertainment centers were, and the Warrior district where all of their training and learning centers were.

Adrian's ship made way towards the Residential district. As they approached the asteroid, Adrian could see weapons platforms on the surface, and also many hatches that lead inside. Adrian's ship made way to one of the bigger hatches, and as they neared it started to open, and they entered a large hangar. It wasn't as large as the largest hangars that Warpath had, which were in Forge district, but it could easily hold three ships that were the same size as Adrian's, which was a small transport ship, about eighty meters long and forty wide.

As his pilot docked the ship, Adrian got up from his chair and made way to the docking hatch, his two wolions and two guards following close behind him. They stepped into a mass of people, everyone running around doing their tasks. As they noticed Adrian they stopped what they were doing and gave Adrian a shallow bow with their heads, a bow that indicated respect. Adrian returned their bows with a nod.

Then they passed through several corridors and hallways, until they finally reached a passageway that led them into the living area. They were greeted with blue sky, clouds and sunlight. All were

artificial of course, except the clouds which while man made where functional. The area was one big underground dome, filled with buildings, streets, plant life, and people. The area even had its own weather and day-night cycle. The other two districts, the other asteroids didn't have anything like this dome, at least not on this scale, but then their functions were different. The Forge district was where their industry was, and the Warrior district was designed for training and learning, Residential district was where people lived and relaxed.

Adrian turned to his guards who were in the process of removing their helmets. It wasn't like he needed the protection, he was more than capable of defending himself, and with Akash or Sora always near him Adrian doubted that anyone could get close enough to harm him. Especially since the wolions would know if anyone wanted to, as they were empaths. But the guard was a sign of stature, and as such was necessary, at least outside of Warpath. But here it was redundant, Warpath's security was excellent, and their recruiting checks were thorough. It was unlikely that anyone would pass through, if there even was anyone who would want to harm him. The Empire was stable, people were content, well aside from some in the Terran clan, but as their progeny grows up even that will disappear.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the tournament." Adrian said, looking at the two women.

Meifeng raised her eyebrows, "You'll come to watch this year?" She asked grinning.

"I think that I will compete this year." Adrian responded with a smile.

Meifeng's grin froze on her face, and Clara's mouth hung open.

"You." Clara said pointing at him, "Will compete?" She asked.

"Yes, I need to show the people that I am still the best." Adrian said.

Meifeng looked uncomfortable, "Uh… Boss, the last time you were in the tournament was ten years ago. That is a lot of time, and you haven't really been focusing on training in that time…"

Adrian looked at her still smiling. He understood what she wanted to say. "You think that I would allow myself to fall behind those I lead? There is a reason as to why I am the Clan Leader." Adrian said.

"I don't doubt that you are strong, or that you deserve to lead, but you have a lot of responsibilities, while others are free to focus on improving themselves." Meifeng said.

Adrian shook his head, "I'll see you tomorrow." He said, and started walking, leaving his two guards dumbfounded.

"You are finally going to address those rumors?" Iris asked.

“The Empire might go to war, I need my people to be sure that I am the right person to lead them. I created Warpath’s ideals fully knowing that someday someone better than me might take my place. Only those who prove themselves worthy may lead.” Adrian said.

“Good, your gifts are going to waste if you don’t use them.” Iris said.

Adrian reached his apartment and sent his passcode to the security system via his implant, as he walked up to the doors they opened to let him in. Once inside, the first thing he did was to get food for Akash and Sora, and then called his second in command and arranged to meet with him at the Forge a bit later. He then made his way to the bathroom to take a shower.

Once the water hit his head, his thoughts drifted to the fact that his quarters were empty. Adrian was fifty nine years old or one hundred and nineteen if one counted the time he spent in stasis on their trip to Sanctuary. And he, like every member of the empire looked like he was in his mid-twenties. And yet he still didn’t have anyone to share his life with, apart from the two wolions. Ever since Bethany married, he just didn’t connect with anyone on a level where he would feel comfortable letting them into his life.

He did have dalliances that lasted for a night, sometimes several, but nothing serious. There was no one who captivated him the way Bethany had. He wanted something real, a partner with whom he could share his very long life with. He looked at Seo-yun and Tomas and envied them their connection. The two of them were both powerful and accomplished people. They each had their own separate lives, but still, they loved each other. They shared a life. And sometimes Adrian thought that he would never find anything like that.

He sighed and turned off the water, getting out of the cabin and grabbing a towel to dry himself. He hated those new steam drying posts, and preferred to use good old fashioned fabric. He went into his room and dressed, he had a few more minutes before he had to meat Isani at the Forge.

* * *

An hour later Adrian walked into a meeting room at Forge’s main shipbuilding facility with Sora following behind him, inside he was greeted by Isani, his second in command and best friend. Isani had a tail and pale gray skin like all Nel. He also had only one name, that which was given to him at birth. He used to have a surname which designated his purpose in Nel society. But all Nel who joined the Empire renounced those names. Some took surnames for themselves,

while others chose to go only by one name. And in this day and age, it wasn't really necessary to have more than one name, every person had an implant which had a unique signature, serving as a form of identification.

"So, what happened?" Isani asked as soon as Adrian sat at the table, then reaching to pet Sora as she walked over to him.

Adrian quirked his eyebrow and made a Nel gesture with his hand signaling puzzlement, "What makes you think that something happened? Can't I catch up with a friend?"

Isani snorted in a very human way, "You called to meet with me immediately after you arrived. You haven't done that during all the time I know you. Meaning something happened."

Adrian nodded grimly, "Yes, something happened. Sowir are gathering forces for an attack on Nelus."

"They finally decided to finish what they started…" Isani said quietly.

"Yes." Adrian said.

"I assume that the Emperor has a plan?"

"There is a preliminary plan, yes. It involves attacking their territory while their forces are otherwise engaged."

Isani closed his eyes, "We will leave Nelus to fend for itself?" He asked, pain evident in his voice.

"That depends." Adrian said. Isani opened his eyes and looked at Adrian hopefully. Even with everything that happened between Nelus and Nuva, Isani still cared about what happened to the Nel home world.

"Depends on what?" Isani asked.

"On whether or not we can make our fleet fully operational before Nelus falls." Adrian said, and then proceeded to tell him the plan.

Isani's eyes widened and he stared at Adrian. "That, will be difficult. Assuming that everything goes according to plan, we would still be taking ships with completely untested technologies into battle. If we even manage to get the technologies to work, that is."

"And how is that any different from what we did thirty years ago? We took new, and untested ships against the Sowir." Adrian responded.

"Yes, but those ships were based on technologies and principles that your race used for hundreds of years. What we are trying to do now is mostly new, even with all the simulations we are doing we can't be sure how any of the new technologies will behave in combat."

"I know, that is why we need to start testing now. Sanctuary will provide us with anything we need in order to finish the ships as fast as we can." Adrian said, "And we can't allow ourselves to fail Isani,

because if we do Nelus will fall."

Isani sighed. "Well, I guess that it is fortunate that we have achieved the means to complete stage one yesterday." He said.

"We did? Why didn't you send me a report?" Adrian asked, already feeling excited. They had struggled to achieve stage one for around ten years, the point where they had finished the hulls of all ships. Their progress was very lopsided, some ships had their hulls completed years ago, while others were just frames and carrying beams. They had focused on other things while they researched technologies, so most ships already had power sources installed and cables run throughout the ship, some ships more than others, depending on what else they needed to do.

"There was no point, you were scheduled to return today anyway."

"Right." Adrian answered, "Tell me."

"It's better if I show you." Isani said, and with that the three of them started towards the shipyards. They passed through four corridors until they reached their destination. Adrian approached the massive windows and looked at the vast cavern. The cavern was two hundred kilometers deep, and some two hundred across, and it was filled with activity, shuttles moving from one side to the other, from the massive tunnel leading outside and to it. Its walls were covered in docking ports, elevators, and twelve large assembly docks.

Ten of the assembly docks were filled with ships in different stages of completion. From Adrian's vantage point they looked small, but he knew that they were massive, each more than a kilometer and half long. Each completely different from the others, unique, each part built specifically for a single ship. There were no mass produced parts, every single one was built separately for a purpose.

Adrian watched them in the distance, as small figures moved about doing the work, here and there he would see a metallic construct moving about – manufacturing robots. Slowly Adrian turned back to Isani and the two made way to the elevator that will take them three levels up. They rode in silence until they reached the main deck, then they walked a few minutes more to the development lab.

Inside the room was brightly lit, with hundreds of holo prompts and screens hanging in the air, with dozens of people moving around or sitting at their stations and working. No one noticed the new arrivals, but as Isani and Adrian moved through the room people started to take notice. No one stopped what they were doing, they just acknowledged the presence of their leader with a nod. Isani led Adrian and Sora through a door at the end of the room, and then into a testing lab. There were four people inside looking through a view-glass at a plate of overlapping silver metal plates while a small laser

beam was firing on it. The view glass was filtering most of the bright light from the reaction, so they could watch without burning their eyes.

Adrian watched as the light shut off and the four people started gathering and studying the data. Before they could really get into it Isani cleared his throat and the four turned to look at them. When they recognized them all bowed their heads slightly, and the Nel woman who was obviously in charge stepped towards them.

“Clan Leader, to what do we owe the pleasure?” She asked respectfully. Adrian smiled, he had spent enough time around scientists and researchers to know that they hated being interrupted and watched over. He even had a few be downright disrespectful and condescending when he asked them a question. Chief Lasani on the other hand was always respectful and cordial, even though her choice of words might not always make that apparent, but Adrian could feel her emotions through Sora and Akash and knew she was sincere. She always took the time to explain to Adrian anything he was interested in. He liked that about her.

“Chief.” Adrian nodded back, “I hear that you finally managed to reproduce the Ra’a’zani hull plates?”

Lasani glanced at Isani then behind her at her coworkers before responding. “Well… we did, in part.” She said.

Adrian raised an eyebrow, “In part? What do you mean?”

“Reverse engineering something isn’t as simple as scanning a piece and unlocking its secrets. We had to learn and develop completely new concepts and technology.” Lasani said distractedly, almost as she was saying it to herself and not Adrian.

Adrian felt the side of his mouth quirk up, “I am aware chief, we recovered pieces of Ra’a’zani ship a long time ago. I have never pressured you about results, I am not criticizing you.”

Lasani’s eyes locked with Adrian’s and focused. She watched him for a long second and then he felt her relax. “I’m sorry Clan Leader, it’s just that sometimes it can be very frustrating, having something in front of you that you can’t explain and yet you know that it works.”

She shook her head, and continued. “Right, where was I… Yes, we have been able to learn a lot from the Ra’a’zani hull pieces, and from the footage that the Monarch and the other surviving ships took. Scans of the Ra’a’zani hull had revealed that it was a composite of a metal-nonmetal alloy and a ceramic like material, with a kind of circuitry imbedded inside it. We don’t really know how the circuitry works, but we know the effect, it somehow allows for a sort of matter compression, that is what we believe allowed the Ra’a’zani ship to basically change hull modes, the rippling effect that our ships documented when the Ra’a’zani ship’s weapons raised from inside the

ship. It also makes the hull virtually invulnerable to laser and particle beam fire of a certain magnitude – similar to our hull coating, only much more effective. We have tested and found the level at which the shimmering field of the Ra'a'zani hull loses its effectiveness, our current laser and particle weapons would be able to inflict damage to the Ra'a'zani hulls although the shimmer would still dissipate about half of the strength. The truth is that even now we haven't been able to identify all the materials used to make the hull. The only thing that we have identified are titanium, carbon and a small amounts of risuminum – a metal that we have discovered just twenty years ago."

Adrian narrowed his eyes, "But I thought that you managed to replicate the process? Create the same hull as what the Ra'a'zani have?" Adrian said glancing at Isani who kept his face expressionless. Sometimes Adrian really hated how Nel could do that, erase any trace of emotion from their face, even more infuriating was that he could feel his smugness through Sora.

"No, we haven't been able to replicate the Ra'a'zani hull. It's not like that technology is beyond us, it is just that we don't know the ingredients, we could eventually crack the problem. But I wouldn't recommend focusing on it, there are so many paths that our shipbuilding technology can follow that it is pointless of us to focus on that one, particularly when we know that some of our weapons proved very effective against it." Lasani said, "What we have managed to do is replicate the abilities of the Ra'a'zani hull using our own materials and technology."

Impressed, Adrian brought his left hand to his temple then down to his chest and turned his palm outward in a Nel gesture, telling her to elaborate. Lasani smiled softly at Adrian's use of her people's mannerism, most of the Nel in the Empire spoke English or what was now simply called standard, but a lot of Nel words and gestures had been incorporated into the standard over the years.

"Our version of their concepts is a bit different, as you well know we still haven't been able to manage matter compression on such large scale." Lasani said, referring to the lower scale mater compression that Clan Warpath's military R&D was attempting to use in their battle suit and armor development.

"But we did manage to recreate the shimmering field. Ours is working on a slightly different concept, we have no internalized circuitry to handle the field creation in the material itself, but rather specialized nanobots that move through the coils that are connecting field emitters, and they can be added to the bottom of the hull walls, which means that we can add the field to any kind of hull. Our field is a bit stronger, about forty percent, but it also requires a lot more power. Our hull is more durable, able to withstand a lot more

punishment and is more heavily based on metal alloy of risuminum and steel and as few ceramic as possible, that is why we chose to name the material ri-steel. Basically, it is superior in all areas except the mater compression."

As soon as she finished Adrian smiled widely. "Well done! How soon do you think that we can start producing the hulls for the Tiamat and the Titan? And do you think that it will be possible to update the hulls of the rest of the ships?"

"Production can start in a few days, as for the updates, that will depend on the ship, for a few we can replace the old hulls as they aren't that far ahead in the construction, for others we will need to improvise. Maybe add a lighter layer of the ri-steel over the existing hull, we will just need to try and see how it goes. In any case all of the ships will have the shimmering field installed, whether they have the ri-steel hull or not."

"Great, good work chief. I will leave you and your team to the work." Adrian said, then he turned to now grinning Isani and together they walked out of the room. All the while Adrian thought how things happened to fall into place at the exact moment he needed them to. But then again, it was nice that things went their way for a change.

Chapter Five

Adrian sat with his legs crossed on the floor of his bedroom, if anyone was to look at him now they would assume that he was meditating, relaxing. But the truth was far from it, inside his mind he fought a battle.

More than thirty years ago when he was barely a teen, Adrian received a prototype implant inside his head. This implant came with its own Ai, an Ai that wasn't programed with all of the knowledge it required, instead it was given only enough to know what it was, and the rest the Ai would learn as human children did, from experience alongside Adrian. The Ai with Adrian's help chose its name – Iris, and ever since then the two had grown together. Adrian was the only person who had this experimental implant put in before their brain was fully developed, and as Iris and he grew their connection deepened, and unforeseen side effects occurred.

The interactions between the Ai, the implant, and Adrian stimulated his brain, to the point where he developed unique abilities. Or more precisely allowed him a greater control over his brain and body's abilities. The human brain was an amazing thing, it was powerful, capable of so many things that would seem supernatural. But most of humans never used their brain and bodies to their full potential, the human brain was inefficient, its potential and power bundled up inside a net of pathways.

It was capable of so many things, abilities that human brain was already capable of subconsciously, altering the perception of time – like when solders or martial artists suddenly start seeing events in slow motion during tough situations, conscious control over mind's information processing, ability to consciously remove the limiters that the brain puts on the muscles strength – like when a mother suddenly gained the strength to lift a car and save her child, and others like shutting off pain receptors. And ever since the moment he realized he could do this, Adrian trained in order to master it. For now he was still the only one who could do it all consciously, but his mind was constantly scanned and monitored by the Empire's scientist through his implant in order for them to replicate the effects, they were still unsuccessful.

But along with the ability to consciously do things that any human could do subconsciously or in times of great need, Adrian had developed one more unique ability that had never been documented before. He simply called it mind space. It was an ability where his brain suspended most of its control functions over the body in order to focus everything on a single thing, thought and imagination. It was

very dangerous, the first time Adrian accidently went into mind space while meditating, he had stopped his heart, or rather his brain did. He would have probably died if it weren't for Iris and his control implant. The only reason he survived was because Iris through his implant and nanites inside his body temporarily took over the control of his vital processes, while his brain focused on something else.

The mind space ability allowed Adrian to enter a world inside his own mind where time flowed at a much faster rate than it did in the real world. It was all an illusion of course, his mind was processing and imagining things at a much higher rate than it usually did, he wasn't spending more time in mind space, his perception of time is what was altered, like dreams – a dream usually lasted about 5 minutes but it always seemed longer.

That allowed him to 'shadow train' inside his mind, and coupled with his unique ability to have greater control over his body's function meant that theoretically anything he trained for or learned in his mind space would transfer over into the real world, what his brain learned his body would be able to replicate without the need for him to develop muscle memory. He still had to keep his body in a fit condition, real strength, agility, and stamina couldn't be trained inside mind space. But the mind space allowed him to do so many things that he otherwise wouldn't have the time to do. It was also one of the reasons why he wasn't worried about the participating in the games. Others might have spent years training in the real world, but Adrian had spent decades training inside his mind space, coupled with his other abilities he knew that there were very few people in the Empire that could challenge him in hand to hand combat.

That being said, he still needed to prepare himself. That was what he was doing in mind space, training. He was fighting against conjured images of the masters he had sparred with. Even though his conscious mind might not remember every single nuisance of another person's fighting style, his subconscious did, and in the mind space he had access to everything he had ever seen, heard, or learned. Every book he read, he remembered perfectly as if he had just read it, every memory as fresh as if it was made moments ago.

The scientists that were testing his ability had told Adrian that by focusing so much of brain's processing power on the mind space it allowed him to refresh pathways to memories and data stored in the depths of his brain. That was also the reason why he remembered everything perfectly when he came out of mind space, but over the past thirty years he had learned that memories and knowledge that were not used frequently would become… Not forgotten, but buried beneath new knowledge and memories. Buried until he refreshed the pathways of his brain in mind space.

In mind space, Adrian moved sideways as one of his opponents attempted to kick him in the head, raising his hand to block the inevitable attack of the second opponent as Adrian stepped inside his reach. Blocking the attack, he gently guided the hand of his second opponent as he spun around, then Adrian pushed the hand towards the incoming attack of the first opponent. Losing his balance the second crashed into the first opponent, both of them falling to the floor.

The two on the floor looked like masters of martial arts that Adrian had sparred years ago, before the forming of the Empire. His mind recreating them exactly as they looked like, both young looking as all humans now looked. Their styles of fighting were different both from Adrian's and from each other, but ultimately Adrian knew that they were just shadows of real people, Adrian was fighting his own impressions of those people. They might have the styles of those two people, but ultimately the two were figments of Adrian's mind, they 'thought' like he thought. He was fighting himself.

Adrian stepped back and relaxed, the two opponents on the ground immediately dissolved. He closed his eyes and then opened them to see Sora and Akash sitting in front of him in his quarters. The two of them always sat and gazed at him attentively when he went into mind space, watching over him. Adrian tried to smile but his body still felt numb and unresponsive, he always needed a few minutes to recover completely, for his brain to reassume control over his body's functions from Iris and his implant.

"A productive session I assume?" Iris asked through the implant.

"Yes." Adrian responded simply, he was still a bit unbalanced from the experience, his mind needed to adjust to the waking world again.

"How long were you in there this time?"

"Somewhere between a few days and two weeks I think." Adrian responded, it was very hard to keep 'local' time inside mind space, his perception of time was so warped that he couldn't keep an accurate account of how much time has passed. *"How long was I out?"* Adrian asked.

"An hour and seventeen minutes." Iris answered.

"Hmm… Closer to a week then." Adrian said. They had a rough estimate of how fast time passed in mind space compared to the time that passed in the real world.

"Well…" Adrian started speaking as he stretched his arms above his head and then moved to stand, shaking off the last bit of stiffness. *"How long do I have until my match?"* Adrian asked.

"The semi-finals ended a few minutes ago. So about an hour and a half I would say." Iris said.

Adrian nodded absently as he started walking around the room and stretching. The martial-arts tournament, which was held twice a year was extremely important for Warpath, every citizen of the clan prepared for it intensely. Not every hand to hand specialist attended every tournament, people in Warpath were very busy, but they tried to attend at least once a year. Adrian could have entered the tournament as any other person that was fighting, but he chose not to. He had already won the tournament once and didn't need, nor had the time to fight through the ranks until he reached the finale. But he needed to show his people that he was still strong, better than anyone else.

There had been rumors circulating for the past three years about how he wasn't the best hand to hand specialist anymore, probably originating from the knowledge that Adrian was rarely seen training, with his mind space he didn't have to. But as the leader of the Warpath clan, he needed to put those rumors to rest. People needed to see him as something more than an ordinary person, he needed to be a goal they all strived to reach. He was still the undisputed champion of fleet command, as he held the top scores in Warpath.

There were two ways that Warpath citizens advanced and showed their prowess. One was the tournament, where people fought against each other in hand to hand combat, although it wasn't as crucial as the second. The trials, these were yearlong events that a citizen could enter whenever he wanted, they ranged from solo trials to group. And they ranged across every area of significance, from simulated fleet scenarios to weapon courses and physical feats. Each accomplished trial gave a certain amount of points with every citizen of Warpath having his place at the clan Leaderboard. Adrian rarely did the trials, but when he did he always chose the hardest ones, those that were worth the most points. By doing that he had managed to keep his name in the top 10 spots, even without doing a lot of trials, quality over quantity.

"I guess it's time." Adrian said, Sora and Akash tilted their heads and then got to their feet, together they started towards the arena.

* * *

Clara Bengtsdotter and Meifeng Zhao sat in the Warpath's arena, the tournament was a bit of a surprise. The winner was actually someone who was on the tech path. It was the first time someone who wasn't on the warrior's path won. Now the two of them and the rest of the arena watched the five people on the rectangular platform in the middle of the arena, and even more watched via video. Clara could

see the five of them bickering among themselves, laughing and teasing, they were the five people that accepted the Clan Leaders challenge.

Adrian didn't join the tournament, instead he organized an event and he issued a challenge to anyone who wanted to accept. And the five people on the platform were those that accepted, two were former winners of the tournaments a Nel –Isurani, a human Olja Itic, three were Sentinels that Clara and Meifeng knew very well as they trained together often, Mario, and two Nel, Banei and Lei.

They were supposed to fight Adrian in one on one matched one after another, although they believed that Adrian wouldn't get past the first match. Clara on the other hand wasn't so sure, she and Meifeng had spent a lot of time with Adrian and they knew that he didn't train his martial arts at all, save for a few training sessions once every few months. He was however spending time training his body, pushing his physical limits. But simple strength and speed wouldn't help him much against the people in the arena.

And yet, Clara had seen in him yesterday complete confidence. And thinking back about all the time she spent with him, the way he moved, how he was always aware of everything and everyone around him made her doubt her initial judgment. Adrian Farkas was not a man who was overconfident, who was rash and impulsive, if anything he was calmer and more contained than anyone Clara had ever known.

But still she worried about this event, there had been rumors about Adrian, how his prowess in hand to hand combat was no longer absolute, and in any other leader it wouldn't have mattered. A leader didn't need to be someone who can fight, he only needed to lead. But Warpath was different, to them strength and knowledge in all its forms mattered, and most of all fighting ability. Adrian had turned this clan into a warrior society, they applied the teachings of the ancient martial arts in a modern form to all areas of their lives. They didn't just train in them, they lived them. It mattered to the people of Warpath whether their leader was the best fighter or not.

Then suddenly, a person walked into the arena. Immediately the arena quieted and the five straightened. Adrian Farkas walked slowly onto the platform, his two wolions following and stopping just below the platform. Adrian walked onto the platform and then stopped in front of the five who had accepted his challenge. Adrian, like every other person in the Empire, wore a skintight suit based on Nel skin-suits, it fulfilled all functions that conventional clothes did during the Human history.

It was a mixture of bio materials and a nanite mesh, it kept the body at the optimal temperature, providing protection from heat and

cold, while also satisfying the need for modesty. It felt like a second skin, giving the wearer full range of movement. It was also easily removed or put on, using an implant the wearer could send a signal to the nanites mesh that would release the charge and make the suit loose and separate it into parts, similar to clothing's of the past, which could be taken off in the usual manner. The need for fashion identity was satisfied by people wearing overcoats in different shapes and colors. The skin-suits were the norm.

Adrian's muscles were clearly visible through the suit as it offered nothing in terms of layers, except in the private areas, groin, and chest for women. Adrian was close to stocky in shape, his muscles clearly defined without being bulky, his dark hair cropped short and his face was clean of facial hair, he didn't really make an imposing figure. He was pleasant to look at. At least according to Clara's preference, good looking but not overly so, he was of average height just a bit over a 180 cm tall. There was nothing really special about him. And yet there was something about him, it was not apparent when one looked at him at first, but over time Clara had started to see something just beneath the surface.

Down on the platform, four of the five moved away and left one of the Sentinels – Mario, on the platform with Adrian. There was no announcement of what was about to happen no pomp and fanfare, everyone knew what was coming next. Mario bowed to Adrian shallowly, a bow of someone superior to an inferior. It was an insult, especially in Warpath where almost half of their population was Nel and where they had adopted many of Nel gestures and forms of body language. Adrian didn't respond verbally, only acknowledging Mario with a dip of his head, a gesture of someone who was an absolute superior.

Mario grimaced and his face visibly darkened, he brought his hands up in a ready position and started walking slowly towards Adrian, who was standing there with his hands behind his back, relaxed. Quickly Mario closed the distance and executed a few testing jabs. Adrian used foot work to step just barely out of range. Mario kept attacking faster, and Adrian kept moving out of range, towards the platform's edge. Clara could clearly see the frustration on Mario's face, he wanted to fight Adrian truly, and Adrian wasn't letting him, he never engaged.

The faster Mario went the more impressive Adrian's movements became. He made it look so effortless, he moved out of every attack's range by a hairs breath, his movements smooth and flowing. It looked as if Adrian knew when and where Mario was going to attack before he did. And Mario was becoming increasingly more irritated. In a moment Clara understood and saw the skill that Mario possessed.

Even without being able to touch him, Mario was guiding Adrian towards the edge of the platform, which in turn narrowed the space that Adrian had to maneuver. Clara saw the moment, Mario moved a step back, making a half second pause in his attacks. Then she saw him leap forward with a direct shot to Adrian's head. His attack will force Adrian to either block or move to the side, where he would be in range of Mario's other hand.

Mario had put all his body's weight and power in the strike, and in the split second it was flying towards Adrian's head Clara knew that there wasn't enough time for anyone to block that strike, Adrian would need to dodge into the Mario's attack zone. And then something happened. As Mario's attack almost reached its target, Adrian blurred. The next thing Clara could see was Mario hitting the floor, unconscious, Adrian standing in almost the same spot he was before the attack, only his body was twisted to the side and his elbow was up, as if he just attacked.

Everyone in the arena was deadly silent, the only sound came from the soft buzzing of the drones that recorded and transmitted to the rest of Warpath.

"Holy shit." Clara heard Meifeng whisper. Clara simply couldn't comprehend what had happened. Mario was a Sentinel, one of top Warpath's warriors, skilled in hand to hand combat, Adrian shouldn't have been able to do what he did. Especially when Clara knew that he almost never trained his hand to hand, and she and Meifeng had been with him for the past ten years. Clara saw Adrian motion to the medical team to gather and treat Mario, although it was unlikely that he incurred any kind of permanent injury. Everyone had medical nanites nowadays, which could quickly and effectively treat any injury, even a broken neck could be treated if it didn't cause immediate death. Then Adrian turned to the rest of those who had accepted his challenge.

"So. Who's next?"

* * *

"I can't believe that just happened." Meifeng said, as she and Clara walked to their joint quarters. The rest of the fights went about the same as the first one did. A challenger would step in, Adrian would dance around them until they fully committed to an attack and would then take them down with a single lightning fast strike. The only one that came close to even being called a fight was Isurani who managed to make Adrian actually use his hand to block an attack, but the end result was the same, with Isurani on the floor.

“Did you see how he was moving?” Meifeng started again when Clara didn’t comment to her previous remark. “He was like a ghost, there one moment and then gone the next.”

“Yeah…” Clara said finally, the whole experience had shaken her. She had always respected her Clan Leader, she knew that he was indisputably the best fleet commander that the Empire had. And she always believed that he was a competent fighter, a master for sure, but she believed that he wasn’t really on the same level as the Sentinels and others who had made combat their priority. What she saw today told her that Adrian was much more proficient in the combat arts than he let on. Far beyond what the markings on his hands indicated. “Did you manage to see how he took down Mario? All I saw was a blur.” Clara asked.

“No, but I looked at the recording on my imp, wait a sec you need to see this.” Meifeng said as her eyes lost focus for a moment. Clara then got a request on her own imp that appeared over her vision in her HUD. She accepted and was taken to the net, then a vid screen opened and a recording of the final few seconds of Adrian’s first match started playing. Clara watched as Mario’s fist drew closer to Adrian in slow motion, and then just at the moment that she knew it was too late for anyone to respond Adrian moved. In a burst of speed he moved his leg to the side and turned his body sideways so fast that even in slow motion it looked like he was moving almost as fast as normal. His elbow came up and Adrian used his body’s rotation to deliver a devastating strike to Mario’s temple, dropping him.

“How can he be that fast?” Clara asked.

“I don’t know, and I for one don’t care. At least now those idiots will shut up.” Meifeng said.

Clara didn’t add anything, and they walked the rest of the way in silence. It looked like there was more to their leader than was apparent.

Chapter Six

July; Year 30 – Unexplored space

The ship was falling apart under the onslaught of hundreds of greenish-white bundles of energy. They were eating at her ship, swallowing her ship's hull. All around, her people were dying, their bodies disintegrating before her eyes. She screamed at them, to not give up, to keep fighting, but there was no one there. She was alone, sitting in her command chair. The holo in the room's center showed that her fleet was gone, destroyed, only her and the enemy ship were left.

The enemy's ship was smaller than hers, and yet it had destroyed her fleet, and was about to do the same to her ship. She watched as it charged its weapons knowing what was coming next, it felt as if she had seen this moment a thousand times before. The enemy ship fired its bolts of energy. A few seconds later the enemy fire reached her ship, and she knew that she was doomed. Alarms sounded, and the entire ship was shaking until it finally couldn't take any more. Fire broke through the hatch leading into the control room, it spread towards her, threatening to swallow her whole. She closed her eyes and released a terrifying scream.

Johanna sat up in her bed still screaming, her hands in front of her face to ward off the heat of the flames. Then suddenly she felt light shine through her closed eyelids, her eyes opened almost unwillingly, and she saw that she wasn't in her old ship's command center, but in her bed, on board her new flagship. As she started to calm down, she realized that she could hear someone calling her name.

"…alright Fleet Commander?" A voice that seemed to come from everywhere said.

Johanna calmed and slumped back onto the sheets that were drenched in her sweat.

"Yes Turiel, I'm fine. It was just another nightmare." Johanna said.

"They have been occurring more often in the last few months, Fleet Commander." Turiel, her ship's Ai said.

"They come and go." Johanna said, she had trouble with nightmares ever since her return from Earth, thirty years ago.

"Maybe you should talk with—"

"No." Johanna interrupted the Ai. "I'm fine, it will pass. It always does."

"As you say Fleet Commander."

With a groan Johanna got up from the bed, her sleeping attire, a

simple old fashioned shirt was completely wet with her sweat, as was the bed and the covers. She sighed and gathered the linens up in a bundle and put them across the room in the washing bin where the cleaning crew would take them to be washed. With a thought she activated her HUD and glanced at the clock in the corner of her vision, noticing that it was close to the time when she usually got up for her shift. Then she went into her bathroom to take a long shower.

Alone with the sound of running water over her body, she reflected back on the nightmare. It was the same one she always had, a nightmare about the Ra'a'zani ship. She knew intellectually that losing most of her fleet wasn't her fault, that they simply didn't know the capabilities of the Ra'a'zani, but even now after all this time it weighed her down. It wasn't only about her fleet, it was the fact that the actions of her fleet indirectly caused the destruction of Earth, and death of billions of people.

She couldn't have known that Ra'a'zani possessed a weapon capable of rendering an entire planet uninhabitable, nor that they would be prepared to use it, but in the end it happened on her watch. When she returned to Sanctuary, the fact that the Emperor and her peers didn't hold her accountable only served to make her feel worse. But eventually she came to terms with what had happened, even though there were still some marks left over.

Her superiors wanted her to stay in command of the Second Fleet, but she refused. At the time she didn't feel comfortable commanding a war fleet. It wasn't until five years ago that she stepped back on the ship. Now Johanna was in command of the Empire's First Exploration Fleet. And she loved the job, she still commanded warships, the Empire had learned its lesson, the galaxy was a dangerous place and the exploration fleet needed protection. But their purpose was mostly exploration.

The First Exploration Fleet consisted of all old class warships that the Empire's war fleets no longer used, four old class dreadnoughts, seven light cruisers, five heavy cruisers, and four battleships along with ten exploration frigates, two repair ships, five supply ships, two mining ships, and three factory ships. The fleet was fully self-sufficient, capable of operating independently for long periods of time, years. They produced their own food, processed materials they mined, and filtered water they gathered from asteroids, comets, or planets.

The frigates were new ships built ten years ago, they were small about a hundred and twenty meters long. Their purpose was to go on solo missions and look for systems of interest for the fleet, usually that included scouting the unmapped trans-lanes. There had been many cases where a frigate would go through the unmapped trans-lane to a system that had no outgoing trans-lanes, in those cases they would

need to come back to the fleet using hyperspace. Which depending on the length of the lane they went through could mean months or even more than a year of travel time in order for them to rejoin the fleet.

The two mining ships were also of a new generation, with their own cargo shuttles and crew proficient at mining in space. Their usual targets were asteroids or small moons, but every now and then they would find a rich planet. When that happened, they would send miners down on the planet to collect samples. The mining ships purpose was to replenish the supplies of the fleet, but also to look out for rich systems and rare ores. All finds were cataloged and results sent back to the Empire. The Empire then sends people and builds facilities for a large scale mining operations.

The Empire was in a constant state of expansion and needed every bit of resources in order to feed its growth. The Empire claimed almost all systems that had a large amount of ore, which had increased its territory tremendously. There were sixteen colonized systems in the Empire, systems where people of the Empire lived, and those sixteen systems were all contained within a sphere of some 60 light years. The Empire had presence in a lot more systems beside those sixteen, they had mining operations in suitable systems within 100 light years, and monitoring stations in others close to the Sowir border as well as in the systems marked for future colonization.

In truth the Empire's territory was an oblate spheroid some 100 light years wide and about and 80 high in reference to the galactic center. The Empire's territory was below the galactic plane – the Empire used the galactic center as one of the points of reference for its maps, but the galaxy wasn't a slim disk, it had depth, so they also used the galactic plane. A referential tool that split the galaxy in half.

The three factory ships kept the fleet supplied with anything it needed, the large nine hundred meters long ships, each held large fabricating factories capable of producing everything the fleet needs, but also fabricating satellites, com drones, monitoring stations and even facilities for starting colonies. They were the reason why the fleet didn't need to return to the Empire often. The supply ships carried all of their food processing and water refinement factories. The ships had few agroponics bays, but most of their food came from processing bio matter in the bio-fabricators.

As for the warships, they were ships that had been built before the Empire was founded or just after. They were good ships, powerful, but the Empire's technology had leaped forward in the last few decades, enhanced with the new technologies they discovered, acquired from the Nel, or those that Johanna brought back from Earth. The newer ships were bigger and far more powerful, the dreadnought Mk 2 class warships were the foundation of the Empire's

fleets, mush as the older class was.

Johanna's fleet of forty two ships was tasked with exploring the territory around the trans-route from Sanctuary to Earth, as the Empire's main expansion was in that direction. The plan was for them to eventually bring their home system under the Empire's control. Even with Earth ravaged and uninhabitable it was still humanity's home. For now they had only a few small unmanned scanning stations that monitored the system looking for any signs of the Ra'a'zani return. The Empire was fueled by its rage towards the alien race, by the need to avenge the billions they enslaved and then slaughtered. Eventually they will encounter them again, and the Empire will enact its justice. Every resource that the Empire gained, every technological advancement was for that purpose.

But spreading their territory to Earth wasn't going to be easy. First there was more than 600 light years between Sanctuary and Earth, and while they had already spread their influence they still had a lot more to go. There were obstacles other than the distance in their path. The direct path to Earth was right through two systems that were inhabited by fledgling civilizations. One was a civilization still on the level of primitive tribal communities, but the other one was a civilization that was much more advanced. When Johanna first encountered them they had already reached space, and had sent a mission to the planet closest to their home world. The mission was endangered, the ship they sent was damaged and Johanna had helped. In doing so she had revealed the existence of alien life to the ship's single passenger and revealed her fleet to Trivaxians.

She felt responsible for changing everything about their understanding of the universe, so she left them with a parting gift. A package filled with information. She didn't outright give them knowledge of new technologies, she made sure that they wouldn't be given everything on a silver platter, what she did was give them means to learn human language and the information about many different kinds of technologies. She gave them concepts and ideas, letting them discover how they were supposed to work on their own.

And in the last 30 years they have advanced considerably. They built a colony on the planet closest to their home world and had started to explore their solar system. The Empire had a stealth drone inside their system monitoring their activities, and while the Trivaxians hadn't cracked FTL travel yet, she was sure that it was only a matter of time. Humanity was lucky in a way, they gained a lot of knowledge from the database of the Union ship that Olympus found at the bottom of the ocean. Trivaxians will need to discover things on their own, with just the knowledge that it was possible.

The problem that the Empire faced now was, what to do with

Trivaxians after they cracked hyperspace or trans-travel. There had been a lot of debate, because this case will set precedent for all future encounters between the Empire and fledgling civilizations. It had been decided that the Empire will not force its way into a civilizations home system, it belonged to the intelligent race that was born in it, and Johanna's fleet had already mapped an alternate trans-route to Earth that added some twenty light years to their trip, but only a week in travel time. But the problem now was how much territory is a race entitled to? Were they entitled to the closest inhabitable system, or systems?

The Empire had far greater economy, industry, and population growth. In all likelihood they will surround the Trivaxian system in less than a decade. And what then? What would they do when Trivaxians emerge from their system, trying to spread and colonize the space around them, only to find out that it was already claimed? The Empire had no definitive answer, there were talks about asking the Trivaxians to join the Empire in some manner, but no one had brought forward a complete proposal. They couldn't decide when an offer should be made, how much would the Trivaxians be required to change.

For now that problem was put aside. The Trivaxians showed no signs of being close to developing a hyper or trans-drive. And so, the exploration fleet's job was to map out the systems around the route to Earth, but also to look for other alien races. If they are still bound to their home system, they would be ignored, if they had started to colonize other systems, Johanna would establish diplomatic relations.

Thankfully, they didn't expect a lot of those kind of encounters, not in this part of the galaxy at least. According to the Union ship data, the area of space that Earth and Sanctuary were in, was sparsely populated. Back in the Union space it was likely that dozens of races would evolve within a 30-50 light year radius. The galaxy was filled with life bearing planets, so the worlds where humans could survive weren't rare. Out of sixteen colonies of the Empire only four were unsuitable for humans, but they had the technology to build artificial habitats so there wasn't really a planet that they couldn't colonize.

Johanna knew that soon the Empire will expand its borders along the trans-route to Earth. For three decades they had built their industry up, set up the clans, and stockpiled resources. According to the plan that the Emperor set up at the founding of the Empire, the time of rapid colonization will begin soon. The Empire's population had grown sufficiently that from this point onward its growth will increase exponentially. Thanks to the progeny centers in another two decades the Nel and Human population will reach nearly two billion. They will spread themselves thin, but it was necessary, they needed to

constantly fuel their expansion. The Empire's industry and resource gathering had already far surpassed their needs, it was time for the excess to be put to use.

Finishing her shower, Johanna dressed and made her way towards the Command Center.

* * *

Two days later Johanna sat in the command center of her fleet's flagship, the dreadnought Monarch. It was the last of the old class dreadnoughts to be built, and it was named after her old ship, the one that she commanded in battle in the Solar system. The ship was scuttled when she returned to the Empire, even though she was still operational. But the damage she sustained guaranteed that she would never again see combat.

"We are detecting a vortex opening at the trans-station Fleet Commander." Her ships Sensor Handler said.

Johanna nodded, they had been expecting it.

"Contact, a ship has emerged." Sensor Handler reported, "It's the Gracious."

Johanna allowed herself to relax, hoping that her subordinates hadn't noticed. "Tell the fleet to go to green stations." Johanna said turning to her Comm Handler. Even though they knew that the Gracious would arrive now, she had ordered yellow stations throughout the fleet. A part of her, a small part that was still in the Solar system didn't allow her to let her guard down. "And contact Ship Master Resaani, I want him to report to me in person as soon as he is able." The news that the Ship Master of the Gracious reported back was significant, and she would need to talk to him in person.

"Right away, Fleet Commander." The Comm Handler said.

With that, Johanna stood up from her command chair and made way to her ready room, which was connected to the Command Center. Inside, she went behind her desk and sat down, with a flick of a hand and a mental command her see-through glass desk came to life. A myriad of holo windows appeared above it and a similar number showed on the desk's surface. There were countless reports and fleet requests, the fact that she knew that these were only the reports and requests that concerned the whole fleet made Johanna's head spin. But she resigned herself to another day of reading and answering requests. She synced her imp to her desk computer to speed up her responses and started with the oldest reports and requests, she quickly scanned the topics and started reading. Three hours later she was still looking at the endless wall of reports when a chime announced that

she had a visitor. With a mental command she opened the doors.

Resaani, Ship Master of the Gracious walked in. He was pale as all Nel were, and was dressed in the blue skintight suit – the fleet variant of the suit that everyone in the Empire wore now, but his rank was shown on a small vest that he wore over it.

“Fleet Commander.” Resaani said and then saluted fist to chest as he walked up to stand in front of her desk. Johanna returned the salute, then with a flick of her wrist she shut off her table and stood. She walked around her table and gestured with her hands for Resaani to take a seat at one of the couches in the room. Resaani nodded and took a seat on one of the new couches designed with a hollow to accommodate Nel tails, Johanna took a seat across from him.

“Report.” Johanna said once they settled. She had already read the Ship Master’s report, but she had learned early on that subordinates don’t always put everything they think into writing.

Resaani took a deep breath and then started. “As you know, we arrived in an unexplored system four days ago and started conducting the usual survey of the system. Inspecting the planets, scanning for life and anomalies. A day into our survey of the system we detected an outgoing trans-lane, as per the regulations, I dispatched a probe through the lane.

The probe’s travel time through the trans-lane was nine hours, and after it arrived in the next system it relayed its position – which was a system about fifteen light years from the Gracious’ position, it then started taking passive scans of the system. The scans didn’t reveal anything unusual at first, but then as its scans progressed deeper into the system it detected something strange. We studied the scans, and I decided to let the probe get closer and allowed it to take active scans of the anomaly.” Resaani then grew quiet, but Johanna didn’t say anything. She knew the Ship Master well enough to know that he was simply organizing his thoughts. “The scans revealed that the anomaly was in fact a debris field, and according to the scans it was a result of a battle. By our estimates the battle happened sometime in the last month.” Resaani said, and Johanna nodded.

“Thank you Ship Master Resaani.” Johanna said dismissing him, she will need to take the fleet to take a closer look at the debris field. The Empire had learned its lesson from what happened to the Voyager when they first encountered the Sowir, and they knew that the galaxy was a dangerous place.

Chapter Seven

July; Year 30 – Sanctuary

Laura Reiss Fleets Master of the Empire walked down the corridor of Fleet Headquarters on Sanctuary's moon – Thanatos. The entire moon belonged to the Fleet. The moon itself didn't support life, but the Empire had the technology and was able to build facilities with their own artificial atmosphere and gravity. Laura turned a corner, and reached her destination. She entered the meeting room and found that everyone who was supposed to be there had already arrived. Immediately after entering she started the meeting, she had known people inside for a lifetime, and there was no need to waste time on greetings.

"The Emperor had finally sent the word, from about an hour ago the Fleet is officially on the imminent war footing. We don't know when the attack on Nelus will begin, but we need to be ready. You all know the plan, as soon as the Sowir fleet gets committed to sieging Nelus, our fleets will attack the Sowir Dominion's territory. Until that happens we need to focus all of our resources on figuring out what we can expect from the Sowir, their capabilities, numbers, and anything else that may impact the war. We will also increase our ship building efforts. The more time the Sowir take to commit to their attack on Nelus, the more time we will have to build new ships, train crews, and upgrade our existing ships. Questions?"

Oswald Mein Commander of Fleets was the first to comment. "We are really going to leave Nelus to themselves? We are going to sacrifice them to defeat the Sowir?"

Laura shook her head. "There is another plan concerning Nelus, if they hold out long enough or Sowir take too long before they attack we will help them. The key to our plan is that using our trans-travel capabilities we will be able to move faster through Sowir territory. If most of their fleets are committed at Nelus we will be able to smash through any other defenses they have and lay waste to their industry, before the fleets attacking Nelus realize what is happening. And once they do find out, their most likely response will be to race back to defend their territory. Rest assured, if we are able, we will give aid to Nelus."

Relieved Oswald nodded. Then Maret, former Retnor of Nuva now Fleet's Head Quartermaster spoke, "I assume that I am free to start constructing support ships and stations? We also need to choose a staging system, someplace out of the way but still close to Sowir territory, preferably a hub system with many outgoing and incoming trans-lanes."

“Yes, I am approving the fabricator time for your department. As for the staging system, we will be meeting separately later to discuss that.” Laura answered.

“What about our warship construction lines?” Daria Veisi Head builder for the Fleet asked.

“We’ll have other meetings, but for now you should prepare for a full scale ramping up of all our projects. I am also approving your designs for the Furious class battleships.”

“What about the Kraken class dreadnoughts?” Daria asked.

Laura grimaced. “I am not so sure about that one. The thirty five percent less firepower than the Mark Two dreadnought class worries me.”

“But it would be at least three times as maneuverable.” Daria pressed.

“We’ll talk about it later.” Laura said. Then she looked around the room and clapped her hands. “Okay, go meet with your people, write up plans and send them to my office for approval. We have no time to waste.”

* * *

A couple hours later, Laura sat in a room surrounded by holograms and displays, listening to Daria and her team trying to convince her that the Kraken class dreadnoughts were viable. They started with listing all of the specifications of the proposed ship, then moved to the simulations they ran, and finally to what the role of these ships would be in a fleet.

“Everything that you have just told me, a Mark Two can do better.” Laura said.

“The Mark Two’s are slow, the Kraken class could move to engage much faster—” Daria started.

“We have battleships for when we need to engage faster. You are not doing a great job of convincing me that we need these ships…” Laura interrupted.

Daria looked helpless, Laura could see that both she and her team were very enthusiastic about it, but they just didn’t provide a sufficiently valid reason to make these ships. Laura sighed, she was about to call an end to the discussion when one of the Daria’s team leaders stepped forward.

“Ma’am, if I may.” He said. Laura looked at him, reading the name provided by her implant above the man’s head.

“Go on Ritsarni.” Laura said, and the young Nel took a deep breath. He was very young, Laura accessed his files and saw that he

was 24 years old, and that he was also one of the first Nel to be born in the progeny centers on Nuva.

"You are correct Fleets Master, together our battleships and dreadnoughts can do the same thing that the Kraken class would be capable of. But it isn't really about that. Currently our fleets are much more firepower oriented, I believe that what happened with the Ra'a'zani scared us in a way. We downsized our drone program before it even had the chance to shine, because we knew that those drones wouldn't be a match for the Ra'a'zani." He turned to look at the screen.

"We chose to focus on quality over quantity, and we turned our fleets into juggernauts. We stopped building cruisers, and instead focused on battleships and dreadnoughts. Because we are not limited by budgets and costs, we made them bigger, more powerful yes, but we lost a lot on utility. Our battleships are fast and sturdy, but they have limited amount of ammo. Our dreadnoughts are fleets in of themselves. Each one of our Mark Two dreadnoughts alone could lay waste to a fleet the size and capabilities of the one that attacked Nuva thirty years ago. But only if it managed to force that fleet to fight, the Mark Two's are too slow. We need a class of ship that can move fast and force the enemy to fight, to keep them occupied until our dreadnoughts arrive." He waved a hand in a Nel placating gesture and cut off Laura before she even had a chance to interrupt.

"Yes, I know that is the job of our battleships, and they are fully capable of fulfilling that role against enemies that are on the technological level of the Sowir or Nelus. But do you believe that they could do the same against a Ra'a'zani fleet? And I am talking about the ships of the same class as the one that almost destroyed the second fleet, not a fleet that included their bigger ships, and we know that they have much larger ships." Ritsarni looked at Laura determinedly.

"Our battleships are great at short engagements, or fighting within systems where they could easily be resupplied. And yes, I understand that fleets have supply ships, but they won't be able to resupply battleships while they are actively engaging the enemy. That is why we need the Kraken class, it is a hybrid class, a cross between a dreadnought and a battleship. Faster than both, sturdy, and capable of prolonged engagements. The loss of firepower compared to the Mark Two is intentional, we don't need them to fulfill the role of the Mark Two's, we just need them to keep the enemy fleets occupied long enough for the rest of the fleet to arrive. That is why it has so much more ammo space compared to a battleship and less weapons than the Mark Two and an extra two power cores, it is supposed to last in a battle longer than the Mark Two. We need to introduce more versatility into our fleets." Ritsarni said, he seemed to prepare to say

something else, but Laura brought a hand up to stop him.

She started thinking about what he said, and immediately realized that he was right. The events in the Solar system had scared them, and the Empire's response was to build bigger and much more armored ships. That was one of their strengths, their ability to work with metals, and the Empire had focused on it. Their response to the Ra'a'zani weaponry and technology was to make even larger, more massive metal monsters than what they had sent to Earth.

The only reason they even managed to defeat the much more technologically advanced Ra'a'zani warship was because they had far thicker hulls, greater mass, and pure destructive power of their ballistic weapons. Humans had learned that their weapons were considered obsolete and primitive, which in a way Laura agreed with, but only partly. The reason why most races eventually abandoned ballistic weapons in favor of energy weapons was that at the distances that energy and light speed weapons could effectively engage were impossible for ballistic weapons, and they were also much more cost effective and could be fired as long as you had the energy. Any ship that saw ballistic weapons fired at it could easily move out of the way. That doesn't in any way negate their effectiveness, if such weapon hit it would inflict damage.

The materials that technologically advanced races used for their hulls were geared towards defending from energy and laser weapons, and deflecting small grains of debris in space. Not to stop a 200 kilogram slab of metal. But in order for it to hit you either needed to trick the enemy or close the range. And that was what the human ships were built to do. Withstand the enemy fire until you closed the range, and then pound them into oblivion. But that was also a problem, fighting in space was very different. It was almost impossible to engage a moving opponent if he didn't want to fight, unless he was much slower than you.

Ritsarni was right, they needed ships fast enough to close the distance and keep the opponent fixed in place while their slower ships arrive. Laura brought the schematics of the Kraken class back on the display and studied it more closely, now keeping in mind what its role would be in a fleet. Daria and her team shifted uncomfortably, but Laura noticed that they looked more hopeful now.

"The hull." Laura started, "You want to use ceramic alloys, reinforced with ri-steel only in a few places." She grimaced, "And with reduced hull thickness it will lower the amount of punishment they will be able to take."

Now it was Daria who stepped in. "Not if we incorporate the shimmering field generators from Warpath into the design." Daria said, and Laura nodded. She had read up on the Warpath's find, and

while the way the Fleet built their ship didn't allow most of them to be upgraded, she was looking into upgrading those that could be.

Seeing that Laura wasn't commenting emboldened Daria and she continued. "But even without it the Kraken class would be more geared towards fighting laser and particle weapons, so far we are the only race that is using ballistic weapons in our neighborhood. And using these materials lowers the mass of the ship by sixty percent, which is what will give us additional speed and maneuverability. Our drives are extremely powerful, but most of our ships are so massive that it takes a lot out of them to move the ships. The Kraken would be able to take advantage of our powerful drives. We estimate that they will be faster than the battleships by at least twenty five percent, while still being larger and having about the same mass. Even if we encounter another race that uses similar weapons as we do, the Kraken's maneuverability will be enough to evade any ballistic fire."

Laura looked at the schematics again, taking in the shark like shape of the ship. It was clearly influenced by Nel designs, not the boxy and sharp angled human ships. She then skimmed through the list of weapons and many other things. The ship was supposed to be 1100 meters long, four hundred meters shorter than the Mark Two dreadnoughts. A few minutes later Laura looked back at Daria and her team.

"Alright, I am approving the design. But we still need to discuss how many of them we need and what are we going to cut down on." Laura said, and immediately smiles broke out on the faces looking at her. Laura returned their smiles and stood to leave the room when Daria hesitantly spoke.

"Um… We did have one more thing that we wanted to present you." She said.

Laura narrowed her eyes at her. "Really? Tell me, what more have you prepared?"

"Well, we have a suggestion concerning the Furious class battleship design." Daria said.

Laura raised her eyebrow and remained silent, waiting. Daria sighed and sent the package to the room's computer from her implant. A moment later the displays and holograms of the Kraken class were replaced by those for the revised Furious class. Or as it looked a complete rework.

"You want to make it a drone?" Laura said skeptically. "A missile-boat drone."

"Yes." Daria said simply, studying Laura. When Laura failed to comment, Daria continued talking. "We don't need another battleship class, especially if we are going to start production of the Kraken class. The battleships had simply become obsolete in our current Fleet, as far

as the attack fleets are concerned at least. We can still use them effectively for system defense."

Laura heard her words, but still didn't comment. She kept her eyes locked on the data in front of her. The drone program was born out of the Empire's lack of personnel at the time, and they were built to replace the classes of their ships that simply didn't hold up in a fleet engagement, light and heavy cruisers. The cruisers were the ships most likely to be destroyed in battle, and humanity couldn't afford any loss of life. But with the birth of the Empire and the start of the progeny programs, the problem of personnel slowly went away. The Fleet simply focused more on building battleships and dreadnoughts, with a few frigates as patrol ships and escorts. The drones that they had built before changing gears were delegated to system defense of Sanctuary, and later distributed among the clans.

The proposal of Daria's team was to cut down the 800 meter long hulls of the Furious class battleship by twenty percent and turn it into a drone missile boat. Laura saw the redesigns of the hull where more missile launchers would be placed, but she also saw that the ship was stripped out of all other weapons other than missile launchers, no point defense and no other offensive weapon.

"This isn't an alteration, this is a completely new thing. That isn't a battleship anymore." Laura commented.

"We know, but the Furious class was proposed years ago. We simply didn't have the need to build it. What we now need is something different. A missile boat might be exactly that." Daria said.

Laura looked over the design for a few more minutes before finally sighing and turning to Daria. "Alright Daria, you convinced me. You can start playing with these new toys. But let's wait a bit on the missile boats, we need more proven ships right now."

"Great!" Daria exclaimed. "Thank you Fleets Master. You will not regret this." Daria said and she and her team quickly exited the meeting room.

Laura turned her eyes back to the schematics. "I sure hope not."

Chapter Eight

July; Year 30 – Unknown system

Johanna Stern sat in the command center of the Monarch and watched as her crew worked. They have arrived in the system where one of her scout ships encountered a debris field. She had brought the entire fleet to check the field more thoroughly. She didn't dare send just a few ships, if the debris field was really a result of a battle she didn't want to put her people in a position where they might be forced to fight against unknown forces alone. There was safety in numbers.

"Preliminary scans confirm that a battle took place here, Fleet Commander." Turiel's voice said from Johanna's side where a holographic image of a young human male stood.

"Do we know anything else?" Johanna asked.

"The scans indicate that most of the damage is from laser and particle weapons – low power compared to the Empire's current technology. The residual energy signatures of the drives suggest two different types of ships." Turiel said.

Johanna didn't respond, already her mind was working at light speeds. The area they were in was some sixty light years spinward from the Empire's border, but it was also only twenty five light years from the direct route back to Earth. If there were intelligent races close to that route, the Emperor would need to move up his plans and start colonizing in this direction soon. Before another intelligent race claims the area. She would need to start exploring the neighboring systems, and as this system had only one trans-station, the one they used to get here, it meant that they would need to use hyperspace travel which was much slower. Johanna sighed, it looked like she would be stuck in this system for at least a few months. She turned to her second in command, Force Leader Andros Venter.

"We need to check the neighboring systems, set up teams of two ships each. The Monarch and the Salahuddin will stay here with the support ships, the rest are on scouting duty." Johanna said.

"Right away boss." Andros said.

* * *

Trivax system – 50 light years away

A flash of light announced a new arrival into the system. A small oval shaped object exited the hyperspace and appeared at the edge of the hyperspace barrier of the Trivax system. As per its programing it immediately started taking scans of the system. A couple of hours later

it realized that the system was inhabited, there were signs of a space faring civilization on two of the seven planets. As per its protocols it recorded everything it saw. Then after its programing was satisfied it turned towards its home and engaged its hyper drives, and a moment later it was gone.

Eighteen hours later, a monitoring drone came from behind the sun of the system. It was constantly watching over Trivax system, and it scanned the area where the unannounced visitor entered the system. But it found nothing, the unannounced visitor was long gone.

* * *

December; Year 30

Five months later and Johanna's fleet was no closer to the answer to the origin of the debris field than they were when they found it. The scouting parties they had sent had arrived and taken account of the neighboring systems, and they found nothing that suggests an intelligent race living nearby. Granted, they had only checked the system within twenty light years radius. The limitations of their hyperspace drive didn't allow for any further scouting, unless she wanted to spend a lot more time in this area or they started exploring the trans-lanes in the neighboring systems, and Johanna wasn't about to split her fleet that much nor keep it tied up checking every system. The results from the test on the debris found that the ships were built out of ceramic based alloys similar to those that the Consortium used before the war with the Sowir, and nothing they found suggested that whoever fought here posed any threat to the Empire.

The problem was that if she left now she wouldn't get the answer to the puzzle, at least not anytime soon. Not until the Empire expanded this far. Johanna rubbed her temples for a few seconds and then turned and looked at her holo. It would take at least another two months for her ships to return, unless they tried to find a trans-lane route back, but Johanna was unwilling to risk them getting even further away through an unknown lane when the rest of the fleet was already scattered and unable to respond to any call for aid fast enough. She manipulated her holo and sent out the return orders to her ships via their FTL comms. Perhaps something will happen in this system to shed some light on things while she waited.

Chapter Nine

January; Year 31 – Sanctuary

Tomas Klein walked into the meeting room, his gaze going over the people already sitting there. All clan leaders were there with their second's in command, as well as Seo-yun, Laura, and Jack Gin the Army Master, and the representative from the Hand of the Empire. Tomas walked to the head of the table and sat down.

"Thank you all for coming. I have called you here to inform you of certain developments." Tomas said. He looked around the table for a moment and then spoke again. "The Sowir Dominion has been on the move, they have started amassing a fleet of warships and support ships numbering around fourteen hundred at the moment, in a system close to Nelus. Their most probable target is Nelus, and by our projections they will start the attack sometime in the next year. As for our response, we have restarted our fleet shipyards, as many of you have no doubt noticed, and we will have increased the number of hulls by at least thirty percent by the end of the this year."

"Will we be taking any other action?" Clan Leader Barbara Brown of the Terran Clan asked.

"We have a plan in place for a preemptive attack on the Dominion. The moment the Sowir are done with Nelus they will turn to us. All of their previous actions suggest that. Attacking before they are ready will give us an edge." Tomas answered. He looked around the table to catch the reaction of the Clan Leaders, none seemed to be opposed to the plan.

"And what about Nelus? Will we help them?" Clan Leader Sumia asked.

"We are working on a plan to aid Nelus, at this point it is very fluid depending on various factors. We have already used our channels to Nelus to inform them of the danger." Tomas said nodding in the direction of Clan Leader Jusan. "Hopefully they will start preparing defenses."

"And what about the Dominion? What will our ultimate goal be?" Clan Leader Annbjörg Johansson of Clan Gudólfr asked.

"The Sowir are a threat, not only to us but every other sentient race they come across. Worse still, they have proven that they are capable of genocide. The most of the Consortium races are now gone, the Pouute are most definitely extinct, as far as we know so are the Mtural and the Guxcacul, save for the few that survived on Nuva and now live in the Empire. But they are too few for the survival of their races, the Mtural have refused our offer that we try and create the immortality treatments for them and with their reproduction method

it is impossible for us to create anything similar to our progeny centers. The Guxcacul are a long lived race but there are no female's among the survivors. For all intents and purposes the Sowir had completely wiped out three sentient races, and killed most of the fourth." Tomas said glancing at Sumia, he saw sadness on her face. "Nel have been reduced to a fraction of what they were." Tomas shook his head. "Sowir are a blight, and I will offer no mercy to them. We will not conquer them, we will destroy them."

"So we kill them all? Commit genocide ourselves?" Annbjörg asked.

"Before I answer that question there is one more thing that I need to share with you concerning the Sowir. I and a few of the others had been aware of this matter for some time." Tomas paused, he gathered his thoughts and then continued. "The Sowir are not really Sowir, at least who we believe Sowir to be are not actually them."

His words were met with confused looks from most of the room, save Adrian, Laura, and Seo-yun. The three Nel Clan Leaders were the ones most confused.

"What do you mean?" Clan Leader Sumia asked. Tomas gestured to Seo-yun and she stood up and started to speak.

"Thirty years ago after the Sowir attack on Nuva, we recovered corpses of those that our forces killed. We brought them back to Sanctuary and did extensive testing on them. What we found out was… Interesting to say the least." Seo-yun said.

"What did you find?" Clan Leader Jusan asked.

"The "Sowir" brain isn't capable of higher intelligence, they are on the level of a very intelligent animal, but an animal nevertheless." Seo-yun said.

"That's impossible!" Sumia said, "They have a civilization, they build cities, command ships they…"

Seo-yun raised her hand. "I know, but think about it. Have you ever heard or seen a Nel speaking with a Sowir one on one? Other than through a comm system from a ship?" Seo-yun asked.

Sumia was startled. "They don't communicate in the same manner as we do, they need machines, computers to translate whatever their language is, to something we can understand. That equipment is too big to fit on a person…"

"Perhaps you are correct, but I bet that no one has ever seen a Sowir actually use a device to speak with another being, I bet you that there was always a distance between the speakers."

"But still, they can't be animals. Animals cannot use technology." Sumia retorted.

"Again, you are correct. So let me explain. During our testing we found that the bodies have another additional brain, at first it made

sense that they had two. One that was capable of higher thinking and the other used for more primitive thoughts, basic instincts. But the more we looked at the second brain the more confused we became. The brain was filled with things that we later identified as some kind of receivers, and all of its connections to the primitive brain lead to the motor functions. There were other mysteries as well, we couldn't figure out how they communicated. And then we started testing their genetic code in full." Seo-yun paused for a moment, looking at the people around the table.

"We discovered that their second brain was actually engineered and added to them. Over time we even discovered that the second brain was used as a way of controlling the primitive brain and it was made to receive instructions. The higher brain takes complete control over the being, through it, it is capable of executing complex tasks. Whether they are receiving the control signals by technological means or something else we are not sure. But what we are completely certain of is that the beings we believed to be Sowir are in fact nothing more than tools –unwilling agents if you will. Without guidance from the higher brain they will revert back to being simple animals." Seo-yun said.

"How can that be? Wouldn't we notice something?" Jusan asked softly.

"Your knowledge of genetics wasn't nowhere near ours now, and even if it was I doubt that anyone would have looked for something like this. And whoever is in charge is very smart, they kept themselves hidden for centuries." Seo-yun said.

Then Jack Gin nodded to himself and spoke. "Well… Now Nuva makes much more sense."

"What do you mean?" Sumia asked.

"I have reviewed the reports and viewed the vids of our people fighting the Sowir on Nuva, and there had always been something strange about their behavior. If they were guided by something or someone, then their actions make much more sense. The force sent down to Nuva was treated as if it was completely expendable, they were just trying to kill as many as they could. And they weren't acting as trained soldiers, more like a pack that was let loose." Jack said.

Laura then got a thoughtful expression, "We never did find many bodies from the wreckages, and they always had redundancies that made sure their ships self-destructed. When we disabled a ship it was filled with traps and self-destruct triggers. And there was rarely anything we could recover from that."

"Do we know anything about who it is that controls them?" Sumia asked.

"No, other than that they appear to be able to control them from

the distance, at least from a couple of light minutes away." Seo-yun said.

Glancing at Seo-yun, Tomas saw that she was finished so he spoke. "I plan on taking or destroying every piece of infrastructure that the Sowir have, and to cut off the connection they have with their agents. We will not compromise with them, they don't deserve mercy. If they surrender, we will quarantine them on a single world with only their most basic needs seen to, otherwise we will destroy them all."

* * *

A few hours later once most of the Clan Leaders had left, Tomas sat down with the people responsible for outlining their plans for the offensive against the Sowir. Adrian and his second in command Isani sat on the left side of the table with Laura, and on the right were Jack, Seo-yun and an Agent of the Hand. While not actively included in the planning, Hand of the Empire always had people present.

"Are we really sure about this?" Laura said, "We are talking about breaking our word, going to war, and killing a lot of people from a race that we currently have a treaty with." She said uncertainly.

Tomas had struggled with the same for some time. He knew that he couldn't allow Sowir to remain anywhere close to the Empire, they were too much of a threat. But still he held values and ideals he learned on Earth as a child close to his heart. He turned to Laura to try and answer when her adoptive son Adrian spoke.

"I, like all of you here was born on Earth, and I too was brought up to believe in things that people of Earth held paramount at the time. Be kind, do not steal, do not kill, keep your word, and everything will turn out well, you will be rewarded. But the truth is that life is not black and white, there is no good and evil. Only point of view and shades of gray. What we humans and Nel consider good might differ from what Sowir consider good, if they even have those concepts. I have devoted a lot of time thinking about these things, pondering the various beliefs that humans hold paramount as proof of the civilized. And I had spent a lot of time studying history. I have realized that we are not as civilized as we like to think, we have used the values of good to do terrible things, allowed evil to go unpunished in the name of justice and forgiveness." He paused and took a deep breath, then looked around the room.

"We need to decide what path we are going to take. Are we going to be a people that will forgive those that had wiped out three other sentient races, nearly wiped out the fourth and killed our own people with no provocation? Are we going to seek justice?" Adrian's gaze

hardened and his eyes locked with Tomas'. "The truth is that our word to Sowir means as much as theirs means to us. Nothing. The one you give your word to needs to be worthy of trust and respect. The Sowir are none of those things, they are not worthy. We need to end the threat that they represent, not just because they pose a danger to us, but for all other races that they might encounter in the future."

Laura looked at her son, "How can we fight them to such an extreme when we don't understand their motives?"

Adrian turned his eyes to her. "It is exactly because we don't understand them that we must fight them. The Sowir had had time enough to make their thinking known. And make no mistake, they understand us. They were a part of the Consortium for a long time. They couldn't have done that without knowing the motives of the Consortium races. And yet they never even tried to make themselves understood. They are schemers and backstabbers. And they do not suffer other races to be in their vicinity. Their reasons don't matter, their actions do, and they need to be stopped." Adrian then turned back to Tomas.

"If you want the Empire to become what you imagined, we will need to be ready to make this kind of decisions. I am not saying that we should respond to every threat with force, but we must not shy away from it. Negotiating, trying to understand one another, and compromising, are things we cannot abandon. There will be times in the future when we will need to use these things. Willingness to completely annihilate any threat that refuses to negotiate, refuses to understand us or teach us to understand them, and refuses to compromise, that, is the thing that will make us strong. It will be a burden on us yes, but in the end we will save more lives, and keep countless others from suffering."

Then Adrian's eyes softened a bit and he continued. "We humans like to think of ourselves as morally right, as good guys, as people that believe violence and war have no place in a civilized society. Those are ideals we strive towards and look up to. But the truth is not so simple. We are not a peaceful race. No matter how much we try to tell ourselves and others that we hate war, we relish and thrive in it, even with all the horrors it brings. Having an ideal of peace to strive towards is a good thing, it is what keeps our nature in check. And humanity is capable of acts of immense greatness and goodness. But deep down most of us are fighters, survivors, and warriors. A mother will kill to protect her child, most humans will take up arms and fight to protect something dear to them, violence is not something that is hard for us. We must not forget that, our warrior nature is what has brought us this far against so many obstacles, we cannot abandon that part of us for as long as there are things we wish to protect."

Tomas looked at Adrian and thought back on the boy that was in command of a small warship in the orbit of Earth, speeding away to avenge the deaths of innocent people. With every word Adrian spoke, Tomas could feel something inside himself finally come together.

“You are right Adrian. We cannot afford to let the Sowir run free across the galaxy. Whether they will force us to deal with them permanently or not is their decision.” Tomas said. He then looked at Isani. “What do you think?”

Isani was thoughtful and didn’t respond immediately, then after a couple of moments he spoke. “Our history has made us abhor violence and war, we believed ourselves superior, as you said civilized. And we allowed Sowir to trick us, that mistake cost us most of our people as well as our closest allies. The Sowir cannot be left alone to spread across the universe killing all in their way. We must stop them.”

The rest of the table was silent for a few minutes until the silence was finally broken by Jack. “And are we truly able to do that? They have more territory than us, much greater population, and have been in space for longer than we have.”

It was Seo-yun who answered him. “Their technology is inferior to ours, in the last thirty years we have leaped ahead with the help of technology we brought from Earth that they developed during the Great War, and from the wreckage of the Ra’a’zani ship and samples of their technology. Not to mention the sphere that Clan Leader Jusan brought to us from Nelus. Dominion’s only strength is the size of their territory and numbers. And our trans-travel capability will make their size and numbers matter little if we can move faster than they can respond. And if they decide to attack our systems they will be met with defenses that will be able to hold out long enough for our fleets to arrive, if the system defenses themselves don’t prove sufficient enough.”

“Well, we did learn a few more things over the last six months of monitoring of their systems.” Laura interjected. Tomas nodded, that was actually the reason he called this meeting. He gestured for Laura to speak.

She cleared her throat and started. First she placed a small black box on the glass table and a hologram of several Sowir ships and an old class Olympus dreadnought sprang to life in front of them. “Well, first let’s start with this. These are a new class of Sowir warships that we haven’t seen before. Obviously they are inspired after our old dreadnought class as you can all see from their size. They are a bit bigger, about nine hundred meters long, and as you can see they have reinforced armor in certain parts. We believe that they used their standard hull materials for most of the ship, and then reinforced the rest with metals. They must have seen the effectiveness of our ships

and tried to adapt some of our technology."

"Do we know how many they have?" Adrian asked.

"There are one hundred and ten in their staging system. We believe that these are all they have and that this will be their first engagement. The ships have clearly never been in battle." Laura answered, and Adrian turned his palm sideways in a Nel gesture of agreement.

"Another more interesting thing we discovered is this." Laura said and the holo changed to show a grouping of differently shaped Sowir ships. "These are their battleships and cruisers, the same class as they fielded thirty years ago. We haven't seen any new classes of ships other than the Sowir dreadnoughts in the staging system. But what is interesting here is this." She said, and the holo zoomed in on one of the ships.

The people in the room studied the holo and then Adrian's second in command Isani spoke. "Those are clear indications of repairs."

Laura nodded. "Yes. More than half of the ships we managed to get a look at, are ships that have been repaired in some quantity. And there are too many ships that were damaged, for them to be ships from the war with the Consortium. If your people's data is correct they fought that war with about six hundred ships and most of those were destroyed."

"Yes, the data is correct. But then who had these ships been fighting?" Isani said.

"Could have any other races of the Consortium still be alive?" Adrian asked.

"They would have tried to get a word out to Nelus that they survived."

"And what about another race, were there any neighbors close to the Consortium." Adrian asked.

Isani shook his head. "No. And the Consortium never did explore on the other side of the Sowir space. There wasn't a real reason for us to go there, the Sowir were a part of our Consortium and it wasn't like we were expansionists." Isani said.

"If these ships are now here, something must have happened to free them up. Either they neutralized the threat or they came to an agreement." Laura said.

Tomas was looking thoughtfully at the holo when a thought struck him. "That might be why they accepted the treaty so fast, and why they left Nelus alone for so long. Perhaps they had another war on the other side of their territory." He said.

"That could be right, the prospect of fighting a war on two fronts might have scared them, but whatever it was is no longer relevant. They are no longer tied up somewhere else." Jack added.

“That may be so, but there is one more thing we realized by observing their systems.” Laura said and the holo changed to show two different vids. “These are two of the Sowir border systems. As you can see on the left, there was an incident on one of their stations, an explosion in one of their docking points. On the right here you can see one of the Sowir transport ships, less than twenty minutes after the explosion in the first system, it docked with the station in its system and then proceeded towards the hyperspace barrier. A month later it arrived in the system of the incident, it went straight to the station, and upon its arrival the repairs of the station began in earnest. It was obvious that they had waited on the materials from the second system.” Laura stopped and looked around the room.

“They didn’t send a comm drone… FTL comms? You are telling us that Sowir have FTL comms?” Jack asked.

Laura nodded grimly. “Yes. It is the only thing that makes sense. They are still using comm drones, which suggests that this is a new find. But this still complicates things for us.”

“No kidding. If their fleet has FTL comms it shortens the time we have to attack their territory before they recall the fleet from Nelus. It shortens it by half.” Jack said.

“True, but it will still take them months to get back. And with our trans-drives we will be able to strike at systems faster than they can respond. We will only need to work faster and make their fleet split up so that we can take it apart when it is weaker.” Laura said.

“And what about Nelus?” Seo-yun asked. “It will take us a few more months at the least to get ready for our invasion, by that time the Sowir will have surely attacked Nelus. If we commit most of our forces to attacking the Dominion will we have enough to defend Nelus? I doubt that Sowir will recall all of their forces and leave Nelus alone after they have already started an invasion.”

“You are right, they will most likely leave a force to either finish Nelus or to blockade it. Our response is fluid at the moment, if we commit our forces to defending Nelus we will be met with force that outnumbers ours, and even with our technological advantage we will be forced to follow the tempo that the Sowir set. We will take much more casualties than we would if we manage to split their forces and take them on when we have the advantage. Nelus’ defense is another factor, we know that their ships are inferior, but they have a good enough fortified system, and we did warn them. They might be able to cut down Sowir numbers a bit more as well.” Laura said. “That is why our plan at the moment is for Adrian’s fleet to provide aid for Nelus, while our main fleet invades the Dominion.”

“My fleet will be ready by the end of the year. But my original plan was to have the fleet supported by a fleet of drones, at least one

hundred. And Warpath sadly doesn't have the capability yet to build the drones and finish the fleet in time." Adrian said then shook his head. "I think that we need to change our plans a bit. If Sowir have FTL comms our advantage will be countered, we might be able to outmaneuver them, but we won't have the element of surprise anymore, after our first attack every Sowir system will know about us."

"What do you suggest?" Tomas asked.

"I suggest that we take on the Sowir fleet at Nelus." Adrian answered.

"If we send our fleet there, it will just give the Sowir a warning about us and time to do something about it. Not to mention that if we engage in a fight where they have an advantage in numbers, we will take more casualties." Laura said.

Again Adrian shook his head and smiled softly. "I think that you are greatly underestimating how much more advanced our ships are. The Sowir ships are the same as they were thirty years ago, their new class is bigger, but it is nothing new. We on the other hand have built an entirely new fleet that is upgraded by the combined knowledge of the Consortium, Earth, and us. The Earth had more than sixty years to develop its technologies after we left, and they did. Our ships are superior, and they aren't even equipped with the latest technological advancements we have. My ships on the other hand are. I am not suggesting that we send the Empire's fleet to Nelus. My ships will go as planned, what I want is that you give me all of your battleships to come with me."

"Our battleships?" Laura asked.

"Yes. My ships are powerful, but you are right, the numerical advantage of the Sowir is something I am not yet prepared to pit them against. That is why I want the battleships to serve as support. As soon as the Sowir fleet arrives at Nelus, my fleet can come in and catch them between the defenders and us. While your fleet invades their territory. If we eliminate the Sowir fleet before they can recall it, our invading fleets will have an easier job." Adrian said.

"If we give you the battleships our invading fleet will be only dreadnoughts and support ships." Laura stated.

Adrian nodded, "The Kraken class will fill the role of battleships, and it will have more of the advanced tech."

Laura thought about it for a minute then nodded. "It could work. If you are sure that you can take care of the Sowir fleet."

"Yes, with the help of Nelus fleet." Adrian said.

"Well then, I guess that we need to start developing a new plan." Tomas said.

Chapter Ten

February; Year 31 – Trivax

A flash of blue light announced a ship dropping out of hyperspace. A moment later, several more flashes appeared and even more ships arrived, the rate of new arrivals increased until dozens started arriving every few seconds. But soon enough the flashes of light stopped and eighty six ships stood silently at the hyperspace barrier of Trivax system. Then a few minutes later all of the ships started moving together towards Rofvax, the fifth planet in the Trivax system.

* * *

Quvor raced through the halls of the Space Exploration Center on Trivax, the headquarters for the entirety of Trivaxian's space affairs. He was woken not twenty minutes ago by news that their satellites detected visitors to their system. Quvor had immediately dressed and left his temporary quarters, he was visiting the headquarters for his annual brief and assessment, which was mandatory for all who served in the Space Exploration Fleet (SEF). Quvor was the Commander of all SEF ships, after his encounter with the first alien life, his career path changed, he became the most famous Trivaxian, and with the gift that the aliens gave him his people changed. It wasn't easy, there was a lot of strife, but eventually they united and created the Space Exploration Institute to study and develop the technologies that the aliens gifted them with.

Of course the aliens didn't really give them the plans for any of their technologies, instead they gave them knowledge of concepts and ideas. That allowed Quvor's people to learn and discover things on their own. Some on Trivax were very suspicious of that, citing nefarious purposes, because they didn't give them everything. But Quvor knew that the aliens didn't have bad intentions, they helped his ship when they didn't need to, and they had no reason to give them the gift they did other than their good will.

That was why Quvor was feeling elated, visitors to their system meant that the people that had saved him might be back. Quvor had waited a long time for this, he was barely thirty cycles old when they came, and now he was entering the middle age of his life. He had all but abandoned hope that he will get the chance to thank his rescuers in person.

Finally, Quvor arrived at the control room.

“Quvor!” The Director Tofor yelled out and waved as soon as Quvor entered the room. Quvor made his way through the people running around from one station to another. The room was in complete chaos.

“Director, did they establish contact?” Quvor asked as soon as he was closer.

The Director exchanged looks with people around him before turning back and answering.

“Not yet. That is why I wanted you here. We have a monitoring satellite close enough to get a good look at them. Here, take a look at this.” Director Tofor said, and one of his people gestured for the Quvor to look at one of the monitors. Quvor leaned down and looked at the images of the visitors. Immediately he realized that the ships on the monitor looked nothing like the ships that helped him thirty years ago. All of the ships had the same general shape, that of a hexagonal prism, with a few slight differences.

The differences were minor, some had widened back portions, and others had sections sticking out on the sides. But the core was the same. Ten of the ships were much larger than the others, and with no point of reference Quvor couldn’t really tell how big they were.

“These look nothing like the ships that helped me…” Quvor said slowly.

The Director shivered, his fur making a wave in a clear sign of nervousness. “We compared the images that your ship took, but you saw them in person, we wanted to be sure… Are you certain that they are not the same ships?”

“Yes Director. But I guess that it could still be them, they could have different kind of ships. We just don’t know much about them.” Quvor answered.

“We have been sending them a welcoming message since we discovered them, using the protocols that they left us in the message. We have added their learning software with the basics of our language, although if these were the same people they would already know our language…” Director said.

“I concur, if these are the same people why are they not communicating?” Quvor raising his head to look at the big monitor on the room’s wall. He saw the calculation of the visitor’s course and speed. They were on a direct course with Rofvax, and at their current speed will arrive in ten days. “They are going to Rofvax, but I don’t understand why? We only have a small colony there, two mining operations, and a station in orbit. There is nothing else of interest there, if they wanted to get in contact with us it would make much more sense to come to Trivax.”

“Unless they don’t want contact.” Someone said.

“I need to get to my ship.” Quvor turned to the Director. “I think that we need to recall all our ships back to Trivax.”

“What about Rofvax? Should we send some there?” Director asked.

“Our ships are much slower, we wouldn’t get there in time. And we have only twelve ships with weapons, all in orbit around Trivax.” Quvor’s ears twitched. “We need to keep trying to contact them, we still don’t know their intentions.”

“We will keep trying Commander.” Director Tofor said, and Quvor turned and left to get his shuttle crew, he needed to get up to his ship.

* * *

Adjutant Michaela Ogden watched as Fleets Master Laura Reiss walked into the monitoring room, and then made her way towards Michaela. The Fleets Master was here at her urgent request, and Michaela swallowed hard as the dark haired woman approached her.

“Report, what happened?” Fleets Master said as she finally came to rest above Michaela and her station.

“Ma’am. I am in charge of monitoring the drone we have in Trivax system. Approximately an hour ago the drone’s passive sensors detected eighty six ships entering the system from hyperspace. Immediately upon entering they started moving inside the system and towards Rofvax the fifth planet in system.” Michaela said.

Fleets Master’s eyes darkened, “What do we know? Can we identify the ships?”

“No Fleets Master. The ships don’t match any of our visual records. With the passive sensors we are looking at events as they happened sixteen hours ago. If we use the active sensors we will know much more…” Michaela said.

“Hold off on the active sensors, I don’t want to betray our drone’s existence just yet. Let’s see how things develop for now. Keep me informed Adjutant.” Laura said, then turned and left the room in a hurry.

Michaela sighed in relief, it seemed that it was a good decision to interrupt her superior.

* * *

Johanna was woken by a ping in her implant, as soon as she opened her eyes her HUD flashed and she saw that she had an urgent

call from Fleets Master. Immediately she got up and put on a small robe before sitting down on her terminal and accepting the call. The holographic display sprung to life and the face of Laura Reiss looked out at her. In the corner there was a small number, 0.002s, the lag time of the connection. Johanna's fleet was almost one hundred light years away from Sanctuary, but thanks to the FTL communication relays that Johanna's fleet was seeding outside of the Empire's territory they could speak in real time.

"Fleets Master." Johanna acknowledged.

"Johanna, there is a development. A group of unknown ships arrived in Trivax system a few hours ago – clearly more advanced than what Trivaxian's have now – and set a course towards the system's fifth planet. They didn't show any hostile moves yet, but I need you to take your fleet close, I want you one transfer away in case anything goes downhill. It could be a peaceful encounter, but we both know that there is a chance it is not. It has happened too many times for us to ignore the possibility. If it is a peaceful encounter we won't interfere, but if these new aliens are hostile we need to act. Trivax is on a direct course towards Earth, and we can't allow a hostile race to move in, not to mention that I will not leave Trivaxian's to fend for themselves." Laura said.

Immediately Johanna felt her heart tighten, and nausea hit her stomach hard. "What about a war fleet? My ships have been redesigned for exploration…"

Laura shook her head. "It would take them too long to get there from our territory, at least three months. You can be there in seventeen days." Laura's eyes softened as she looked at Johanna, "Our sensors didn't detect anything that suggest that these ships are anywhere close to our level, they are moving slow even by Sowir standards. But I realize that you have been burned by lack of information before. That is why this time you will wait until we are sure that they are hostile, then we will go active with our drone and gather all the information you need."

Johanna grabbed the hem of her robe and squeezed hard to prevent her hands from shaking. "I… Yes, Fleets Master."

"Good. I will send a task force from the First Fleet just in case, but it will arrive too late to be of use for you. You will be on your own." With that Laura saluted and ended the comm.

It took another five minutes for Johanna to gather herself enough to stand up. She walked to her closet and retrieved her skin-suit and uniform coat. All the while her heart pounded in her chest. Images of Earth burning and suffocating in ash as it tore itself apart flashed in her mind. She had thought that time would make the memories go away, but it was still as fresh as the day she realized what Ra'a'zani

had done.

Taking deep breaths Johanna got herself under control, she was a soldier, she wouldn't let fear control her. After another couple of minutes she finally got her heartbeat back to normal.

If the aliens in Trivax system were hostile, she would enter into battle against an opponent she knew next to nothing about again. But failure to do so would be at the cost of innocent lives. And Johanna made an oath to herself that she would never again let the thing that happened to Earth repeat. Straightening her back, Johanna exited her quarters and headed towards the Command Center. She had a fleet to command.

* * *

Two days later Quvor sat on the bridge of his ship, the Survivor. His lower arms were crossed at on his stomach, while his upper rested on the armrests of his chair. There were still no communications from the alien visitors. And they still kept the course towards Rofvax. The more time passed without any kind of response from the aliens, the worse the feeling in the Quvor's chest got. There were probably countless reasons as to why they didn't respond, from incompatible technology to cultural norms. But the only thing that was going through Quvor's head was the last message from the aliens that saved him thirty years ago. *The universe is a dangerous place. If you choose to join us out here, you will need to be ready to face the consequences of that course.*

Somehow, Quvor was certain that the danger of the universe just found his people.

Chapter Eleven

Trivax system – Eight days later

Quvor sat and watched helplessly along with every Trivaxian as the alien ships reached Rofvax. There was no answer to any of the SEC's comms. The aliens ignored every attempt both from the colony on Rofvax and from Trivax. By now there was not a doubt in Quvor's mind that things were about to get bad. He felt so helpless, his twelve combat capable ships were all at Trivax, even if they started the trip towards Rofvax the moment they detected the aliens, they still wouldn't have made it in time. Afterwards it was decided that they should stay where they were, lest them speeding towards Rofvax somehow provoke the aliens. Now it seemed that it wouldn't matter anyways.

Ten billion people watched as the alien ships approached Rofvax. They all watched in fear as the alien ships fired their weapons and destroyed the station in orbit. They all watched helplessly as the ships entered Rofvax high orbit, and then as smaller ships started dropping down to the planet, just outside of the colony site. And then over the next twenty hours they watched as the aliens killed the security forces and then started taking the colonists prisoner.

* * *

Sanctuary

Laura watched as their visual sensors recorded the alien attack on Rofvax, sixteen hours after it happened. She shook her head, it seemed like every other race out there was set on attacking anyone they come in contact with. Trivax wasn't Empire's territory, but they had interests there. They were responsible for the jump in technology that Trivax made. But that wasn't what made Laura want to help them, it was that they were innocent. She had read reports on Trivax ever since they placed the drone to monitor their progress. And she saw a peaceful, kind race. A race that was given a chance to reach out to the stars, a race that was a small child ignorant of the realities of life. But now the universe had taught them a lesson, and they will lose that innocence.

There was no choice, the Empire will not stand idly by as innocent are dying. She let Tomas know first and got his approval. Then she sent the authorization for the monitoring drone to go active and afterwards reached for her comm, Johanna Stern will need to be enough to help them.

* * *

Johanna closed her eyes as she listened to Fleets Master's orders. Her fleet was sitting in the trans-station to Trivax system, and they too had been watching the feed from the monitoring drone, their FTL comm system allowing her to see everything at the moment the drone recorded it. She knew that this was going to happen. Finally, she took a deep breath steeled herself and ordered her ship commanders to prepare for a trans-lane transfer.

In the meantime she watched as the drone went active. It sent a tachyon ping across the system, illuminating everything and getting myriad of information back. The sensors penetrated the alien ships hulls detecting everything that there was about them. Johanna watched as her ship's computer found the match for the ships. The materials and weapon signatures matched those she found in the debris field a few months ago.

Seeing the rest of the alien ship specs, she released a breath she didn't realize she was holding. The alien ships were inferior to her own, they were even inferior to the Sowir ships. Her forty two ships, thirty of them warships, would be able to handle the alien eighty six ships. She recorded a message for Trivaxian's telling them that help was on the way. The trip to Trivax system was nine days, she hoped that they could get there in time.

* * *

Trivax

Director Tofor looked helplessly at the screens in the control room. He, like most everyone on the planet had had very little sleep over the past few days. The horror that they witnessed on Rofvax had given them all nightmares.

"Why are they doing this?" Someone asked, but no one answered. Tofor didn't know, he couldn't comprehend what was happening. His people had never harmed these aliens, and now they were being slaughtered by them. Thirty security officers and forty civilians were dead on Rofvax, and there was nothing that anyone on Trivax could do. Their combat ships were not a match for the aliens, they couldn't even save a few, board them on ships and flee. The ruling council had suggested it, but it would be pointless. They had no ships that could travel faster than the speed of light, and the alien ships were much faster. They would catch them and kill them anyway. There was still no response from the aliens, no reason given as to why they were doing this.

And now the alien ships were coming to Trivax. They left ten ships at Rofvax, along with people on the ground. Tofor had no idea what they were doing there now, not since they lost contact with the colony, after the colonist informed them that the aliens were taking prisoners and killing security officers.

“Director!” One of his subordinates on the monitoring stations called out.

“What is it?” Tofor turned towards him.

“We are receiving a laser transmission.” He answered still looking over the monitor. “It’s a recording from the Aliens in our language!”

Tofor felt his ears quiver, “Let’s hear it.”

Everyone in the control room quieted and a bland voice that couldn’t belong to any Trivaxian sounded out from the speakers around the room.

“People of the fourth planet of this star, we are Furvor. We are laying claim to this system, its worlds and resources are now ours. We know that you have been watching what happened to the fifth planet from this star, consider that a demonstration and a warning. You cannot harm our vessels, you cannot resist our warriors. I offer you one chance to save some of your people. Surrender your world now, lay down all of your primitive weapons, abandon your space vessels and constructs, and we will allow one hundredth of your population to survive. Refuse and all shall die.”

Tofor closed his eyes, his ears slanting forward as he absorbed the alien’s demand. He was terrified, he looked to the side of the room, where the representative of the council was already sending the recording to his superiors. The decision of the council will not make any difference, Commander Quvor’s ships couldn’t stand up to one of the alien ships, let alone more than eighty.

Tofor remembered a time when they were designing their new ships, he remembered Quvor advocating for ships with weapons. But no-one wanted to hear him, they wanted to explore and colonize their star system. But Quvor was adamant, and no one wanted to refuse the most famous Trivaxian alive. So they gave him twelve ships equipped with a larger scale mining lasers, and some rocket propelled missiles. Tofor shook his head, if only they listened then, if they allowed some of their resources to go into developing weapons, they might stand a chance now. Tofor was looking aimlessly at the big monitor on the wall when he heard commotion all around him. He focused on the group closest to him.

“What is going on?”

“All our sensors just experienced some kind of—” Another voice interrupted before Tofor could hear the answer.

“We are getting a tight band laser transmission Director!” Someone from the monitoring stations exclaimed.

“The aliens again?” Tofor asked.

“No! It is coming from the other side of the star system, and it is pointed directly at this facilities comm system!”

Tofor quickly walked over and leaned down. “What is it?”

“It… this can’t be right, the transmission is using our protocols, and it’s a video file.” Tofor looked at his subordinate as he shook his head in bewilderment. Tofor felt the same way, they had no assets in the direction that this transmission came from. Steeling himself Tofor stepped back and spoke.

“Play it.”

A few moments later the video started playing on the large wall monitor that the room was oriented around. Immediately after the video started there were gasps from across the room. Tofor himself felt his two hearts stop for a beat. Every Trivaxian knew who the being in the message was. Every child born after the most pivotal moment in their history had studied that being. Scientist had analyzed everything about it, its skin color, its features, its clothing, everything in order to try and better understand it. Then the being opened its mouth, and just like the last time a voice started speaking a moment later in Trivaxian.

“People of Trivax,” It struck Tofor how different this voice was from the one of the aliens that had invaded his home. Theirs was cold, mechanical, and void of gender and feeling. But the voice that spoke to his people now felt as if it was truly a Trivaxian speaking, it was feminine, and Tofor could feel the determination in it. *“You know who I am, although last time I didn’t introduce myself. We left a monitoring drone in your system to follow your progress, and through it we are aware of the invaders that had attacked your system. Our territory is a long way from you, but we have ships close by. I am sending you this message to let you know that we are coming. Don’t lose hope, we will arrive in nine days. I am Fleet Commander Johanna Stern of the Empire, we are coming.”*

The silence met the end of the message. Tofor was looking at the blank screen in shock. Suddenly an emotion he hadn’t felt since the aliens took Rofvax filled his being, hope.

* * *

Six days later – Trivax orbit

Quvor watched as the invader’s ships drew closer and closer to his home world. At their current speed they will arrive in two days, one day before the arrival of the other aliens. Even now Quvor could barely believe it. He had watched the video message, and recognized the alien being as the same one that had given his people a great gift.

But it was also coupled with anger. The aliens had a small monitoring station in his system, now that they knew it was there it was relatively easy for them to find it.

But Quvor wasn't really angry about that, he was angry that they weren't here to prevent what happened at Rofvax. He knew that this anger was unfounded, he shouldn't expect them to come and protect his people the instant a threat appeared. And if their territory was so far away, then Quvor should be grateful that his people were lucky enough that this **Empire** had ships close enough to come to their aid. But it still weighed on Quvor, knowing that there was nothing he could do, and that if help doesn't arrive before the invaders reach Trivax, it would be on his ships to stall them until it does.

It was a fool's errand, his ships were no match for the invaders. But still Quvor wouldn't let them pass as long as his ships could impede them. They will die to buy his people time. And perhaps the time they buy will save some lives.

Quvor's plan was already in motion, he waited until one of Trivax's moons was obscuring the invaders fleet's view, and then started moving his ships behind it. He was using the moon to keep his ships hidden, while he used the sensors from the station and satellites in Trivax orbit to monitor the invaders. Once they reach the moon Quvor will move from behind the moon and attack them from the side, in a maneuver that will then slingshot his ship back behind the moon. He hoped that that will save at least some of his ships, and hopefully give him another chance to annoy the invaders. Maybe annoy them enough that they decide to first destroy his ships, buying more time for Trivax.

Quvor scratched his snout with his lower left limb, then he leaned back down at the screen, checking his calculations one more time.

Chapter Twelve

Two days later – Trivax's moon

Quvor's ears twitched, for the hundredth time he questioned himself. He was certain the invaders knew that his twelve ships were here. If he was commanding those ships, that would have been the most logical conclusion after he saw that they disappeared. What Quvor hoped for, was that the invaders leader saw his ships as no threat at all, that they didn't expect an attack. Because who would be crazy enough to attack a fleet of seventy much more advanced ships with only twelve?

Quvor glanced at the clock ticking down to the moment his ships would commence full burst and slingshot around the moon to attack the side of the invaders formation. He glanced downwards and checked his straps once more. The speed his ships would be accelerating would be so big that most will lose consciousness. And yet, Quvor knew that those speeds were nothing compared to the speeds of the invaders. There was mention of a way to negate the force of acceleration in the files given to his people, but they haven't discovered what it was yet.

The attack itself would be executed by the ship's computers, there was just no way for his people to control the ship while under so much gravitational forces. Quvor hoped that it would be enough. Then the clock reached zero, and Quvor opened ship wide comms.

"All personnel brace for maximum acceleration!" A few moments later, his ship started to move, faster and faster, until he could feel the straps on his body tighten and his body pressing painfully into his chair. He wondered, if he would survive long enough to thank the aliens for his life.

* * *

Twelve Trivaxian ships slingshot around the moon, the gravitational forces of the maneuver made most of their crews pass out. But their presence wasn't necessary, the computers executed their tasks. As soon as they left the shadow of the moon, they looked at the place where – according to the calculations from Trivax – the invasion fleet should be, and found them within the margin. The ships computers locked on to the closest five ships and fired all their missiles. Each ship launched forty missiles, four hundred and eighty missiles total raced towards the invading ships.

Even though the Trivaxians had the element of surprise, the

invading ships recovered quickly enough. Their point defense lasers started locking on to the incoming missile fire. Quickly the Trivaxian missiles started disappearing in flashes of fire. But as luck would have it, the invader formation was such that their smallest crafts were on the outside of the formation. Their lesser point defense capability, coupled with the relatively short range from Trivaxian ships and the amount of missiles, guaranteed that they wouldn't be able to take them all down.

Then Trivaxian ships opened up with their laser weapons. Their lasers were nowhere near powerful enough to actually destroy the invading ships. But even a low powered laser could prove troublesome if it was allowed to keep its fire on the same area long enough. So the invaders started rolling their ships in an attempt to dissipate the heat from the lasers, which in turn lessened their point defense effectiveness. But just as they took incoming fire, they too lashed back with their own missiles, five ships each fired one hundred missiles in a span of half a minute. And then the Trivaxian missiles passed the invaders point defense. Out of four hundred and eighty missiles, forty seven passed through and impacted the invader ships.

The missiles, just like the Trivaxian lasers were nowhere near powerful enough to actually destroy the invading ships. But luckily one of the invader ships allowed a Trivaxian laser to keep its beam on the same area for long enough to threaten the hull integrity, and out of forty seven missiles more than half targeted just that ship. Twenty five missiles impacted the invader ship's hull, fifteen of those hitting the hull and only scratching and denting it, but ten of the missiles impacted on the area of the hull that was weakened by the Trivaxian laser. The missiles detonated and punctured the hull, the ship lost atmosphere and secondary explosions destroyed its main systems. The ship continued spinning, now dead in space.

The Trivaxian's on their ships didn't even have the chance to realize that their ships had just drawn first blood when the invader missiles reached them. Trivaxian ships had no point defense and missiles flew effortlessly towards them. The missiles were programed to attack the closest ships and as the Trivaxian ships shot around the moon going outside of the range of the invading fleet, they struck. Five ships disappeared in a blinding flash of white fire that lasted a mere moment, eight hundred lives gone in an instant, as fifty missiles struck each ship. Then the remaining two hundred and fifty missiles sped towards new targets of opportunity. Four more ships ended as the remaining missiles slammed into their hulls.

Out of twelve Trivaxian ships only three remained, and soon enough their course led them back behind the moon, and out of the invaders sight.

* * *

Quvor regained consciousness slowly, his mind fuzzy and every part of his body hurting. Finally he came around far enough to look at his monitor. He knew one thing, he was alive. The question was whether their attack was successful. He knew that it was unlikely that they managed to inflict much if any damaged to the invaders, but he couldn't help but hope.

He looked at the monitor and felt a moment of elation as he saw his computer report that they had destroyed one of the invading ships. But then he saw the state of his own ships. He had lost nine ships, traded the lives of their crews for one enemy ship. And it didn't even matter, the invader fleet was so big that one less ship meant nothing for them.

His goal was to try and stall them, but he doubted that he even achieved that much. He knew that now he had no chance of beating the invaders to Trivax, his world will be undefended. Not that his ships could contribute much.

A flash of red and a warning sound drew Quvor's eyes back to the monitor. Ten invader ships were speeding toward his remaining ships.

* * *

Ten hours later Quvor's remaining ships were still alive. Not because of any brilliant tactic on his part, no, they lived only because the invaders wanted them to. The ten ships had been pursuing them at the same pace that Quvor's ships were running, slowly herding them back towards Trivax. The ten ships could have blown them to bits at any moment, and Quvor wondered if they felt some kind of perverse satisfaction watching his ships try to run away while there was no chance of them succeeding. The only reason Quvor didn't order a suicide run on the ten ships was because he knew that help was coming, he only hoped that it came before the invaders grew bored of playing games with him.

The rest of the invader ships were now in high Trivax orbit, their bigger ships were moving around the planet destroying satellites and stations, and bombarding the ground, while the some of their mid and smaller sized ships were entering the atmosphere on their way to the ground.

Every minute that passed, thousands of his people were dying on Quvor's home world, and there was nothing that he could do to help them.

* * *

Trans-lane to Trivax system – Empire Exploration Ship Monarch

Johanna glanced at the counter on the big holo in the middle of her ships Command Center. Ten more minutes until her fleet arrives in Trivax system. She felt nauseated, she was taking her ships to battle for the first time since the battle with the Ra'a'zani. The nausea was only worse because she was unaware of the events in Trivaxians system since the moment her fleet entered trans-space. There was no way for her fleet to communicate with anyone outside of it. Each time the counter ticked off one more minute, she felt a stab through her stomach. She wasn't sure if she could do this, last time she lost so many people under her command and watched the majority of the human race die on Earth. And now once more she was responsible for the wellbeing of a world. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. What she felt wasn't important at all, the Trivaxians were. They needed her, and she would not fail them.

Finally the counter reached zero, and her Navigation Handler announced. "Exiting the trans-lane now!"

The moment her fleet exited the vortex from trans-space, her ships computers pinged the monitoring drone in the system, with it sending them all the sensory data. Then as per Johanna's prior instruction all their sensors went active, painting a real time state of the system on her holo. Johanna cringed as she saw the fleet sixty one of the alien ships already in orbit of Trivax, with five ships down on the planet. Ten ships were still at Rofvax the fifth planet of the system, while another ten were pursuing three Trivaxian ships.

Immediately she saw that they were just playing with them, they were moving far slower than what they were capable of. Johanna's fleet was at the incoming trans-station that was in the planets current orbits located between Trivax and Rofvax, closer to Trivax. Johanna swiped her hand across her command board, sending already formulated orders to her ships. She had several sets of orders prepared depending on the situation in the system.

As soon as her orders were received and acknowledged, she gave the order to her Communications Handler to send out a wideband message prepared for the invaders, and her fleet split off. The dreadnought Salahuddin alongside two light cruisers Kiriev and Seta, one heavy cruiser – Jun, and the battleship Oures set a course towards Rofvax. The rest quickly accelerated to full speed towards the Trivax, their course leading them straight at the ten ships pursuing the surviving Trivaxian ships.

* * *

"We are detecting more ships Commander!" An officer at the scanning station yelled out. Quvor swiveled in his chair and turned towards her.

"Show me!"

The monitors on his chair suddenly showed new ships, speeding towards him at unimaginable speeds. Quvor gasped when his computers calculated the numbers, the ships would reach Trivax in a fraction of time it took the invaders. Help has arrived.

"Commander we are receiving a wideband communication in the open from the new ships!"

"For us?"

"I don't think so Commander, they are broadcasting it in both our protocols and their own."

Quvor nervously crossed his lower arms at his stomach, the invaders already had Trivaxian protocols, and could most likely understand the language.

"Play it." Quvor said.

"Attention invading ships, this system is under the protection of the Empire. Disengage your warships, power down your weapons and drives, and surrender. You have my word that you will be treated fairly, refuse and you will die. Fleet Commander Johanna Stern of the Empire, end."

Quvor's ears twitched, he could feel the rage in that voice, and he had no doubt that she meant every word. But his ship had detected only forty two ships, against twice as many. He wasn't sure if they could win. But then again if their speed was any indication of the level of technology that the Empire possessed, the invaders' numbers might not be an advantage at all.

* * *

Only twenty five of the ships speeding towards Trivax were warships, the rest were support ships for the fleet, but that meant nothing. The invaders didn't respond, but the ten ships that had pursued the Trivaxian ships had fallen back and turned back towards Trivax. Johanna waited until those ten ships were well inside her ships range, and then when the invaders still refused to respond, she decided to make a demonstration. The leading ships of her formation were her ten frigates, ships that weren't really designed for warfare, they were explorers.

But sadly for the invaders, that mattered little. Each of the ten frigates pointed all their forward laser cannons at the ten ships. On

her order they fired, and invisible beams of concentrated light and heat reached out to strike at the alien ships. Each of the lasers hit the back part of the alien ships, melting their hulls in mere moments. Almost at the same time the ten alien ships exploded.

The fleet continued towards Trivax, moving past the three surviving Trivaxian ships. The invaders still didn't respond, but as the light from the destruction of their ships reached them, Johanna could see a change in their positions. Ten of their largest ships started moving back in formation with the other smaller ships. Their largest ship was around 600 meters long, about 200 shorter than her dreadnoughts. The other ships were all between 150 and 400 meters long.

Johanna watched as the alien ships prepared to meet her ships, but she knew that it was futile. They were inferior to her ships. She hoped that they would answer her broadcasts, but no answer came. Finally Johanna ordered her ships to target most of the alien ships, she would leave some intact, hopefully they will realize that they have no hope and surrender. With a determined face she ordered her ships to fire from far outside the alien's maximum weapons range.

* * *

The Exploration Fleet's started launching missiles towards the alien ships. Within minutes 5000 missiles were on their way towards their targets. It was far more than what was required, but Fleet Commander Johanna was making a point. The alien ships feeble point defense tried to take down the incoming onslaught, but the empire's missiles counter measures were far beyond them. Once in a while they were lucky enough to hit one or two of the missiles, but in the end it didn't matter. Less than five thousand but more than four and half thousand missiles reached alien ships. The result was the destruction of the alien fleet. Out of sixty one ships in the Trivax orbit, only five remained, untouched only because the Empire's commander wished it so.

* * *

Quvor and his entire crew watched unbelievingly as the Empire's ships effortlessly destroyed the invading ships. He looked at the overwhelming amount of data that his ships were getting from the Empire's ships. Last time they visited their system, his people didn't have technology good enough to take a closer look. But now he could

see just how much ahead of them they truly were.

Then he remembered that his home planet was under attack and his people dying. He shook off his curiosity and focused on Trivax. The aliens had bombed most of their biggest cities, leaving only those that held large research centers. Which meant that they had managed to hack their communications or computers on Rofvax, and got the information from there. Their ships had all landed with troops close to the places that held valuable technology information on the ground. What need they had of Trivax's less advanced technology Quvor didn't know. But he was sure that they knew that their fleet was defeated.

Quvor didn't know if the Empire had troops to send to the ground to help, but he reckoned that they would need as much info as they could get. He accessed the ships databases and sent them the maps to all the cities that the aliens landed in. Along with protocols and coordinates of all their communications centers on the ground.

Perhaps they could get in contact with the survivors and organize a counter attack.

* * *

Tofor sat in the control room of the SEC building. The alien invaders were outside, trying to get in. But they obviously didn't know everything about the building, if they did they would have known that in case of emergency all entrances and windows could be reinforced by thick steel doors. It was a precaution measure built along with the building. At the time of the construction, Trivax was in a very perilous state. Not all agreed that Trivaxian's should turn to the stars. There were factions that couldn't handle the fact that there were other living beings out there, that they weren't alone in the universe. And security was a great concern. Tofor was sure that the aliens could get through eventually, but the defenses might give them enough time for help to arrive.

Chapter Thirteen

Trivax

Johanna watched as the remaining five alien ships tried to run away. It would do them no good, her ships were faster and far more powerful. She dispatched two of her battleships along with ten frigates to disable, then board and take control of them. She wanted answered as to who they were, and why they attacked Trivaxians. The problem she now had was the ground. The alien bombardment had taken out most of the Trivaxian communications, and those that Johanna could contact knew nothing or at least nothing useful. They had taken ships and forces down to the largest city, their objectives was most likely the Space Exploration Institute according to the maps that the Commander of the Trivaxian surviving ships sent. They probably wanted data concerning the Trivaxian technology, even if it was inferior there was always value in knowledge.

Which meant that Johanna would need to send people down there. She sighed, and opened comms to the army departments on her three dreadnoughts. It was their turn now.

* * *

Platoon Leader Sahib Adin raced through the large bay of the dreadnought Monarch, with his platoon following close behind. Four squads each with seven members made the platoon that Sahib was the leader of, Platoon Wolf. His people were already briefed, they were to be the forward assault team. They will drop down to the planet on four different locations and secure the landing spots.

The aliens had ships on the ground, which meant that they probably had some kind of anti-air capability. And while it was doubtful that they had anything that could seriously harm a newest generation military dropship, there was no need for taking risks. Sahib's platoon would drop down in personal drop pods. Much harder to get a lock on and thus so much harder to hit. This would be their first use in an actual combat, outside of the virtual simulations and tests. And Sahib for one was excited.

They reached the military drop ship that would release their pods towards the planet, all of them entered and found their ways to the pods. The pods themselves were pear-shaped, heavily armored with protection both from the heat and anything else. They even had a small gravity dampener to assist with the landing.

Sahib entered his pod, and secured his battle-suit inside. His

battle-suit was of the newest generation, made after the technologies from Earth were recovered. Until then they were using lighter suits that Olympus preferred, more geared towards stealth. While the nations back on Earth preferred heavier and much sturdier suits. His suit was a hybrid between the two, utilizing both the heavy plates of Earth design, and carbon nano fibers of the Olympus.

As soon as he was secure, he opened a channel to his squad leaders via his implant.

"Everybody ready?" Sahib asked on his squad Alpha's comms.

"Lucky, ready." John "Lucky" Riggs his squad's demolition expert reported.

"Eagle eye, ready." Misty "Eagle eye" Ryss, sniper said.

"Garth, aye." Monroe "Garth" Bennett, assault answered.

"Loca, ready!" Maria Luisa "Loca" Gomez, heavy assault said.

"Red, good to go." Tyrone "Red" Jones, assault reported.

"Bella, ready." Anastasia "Bella" Fontaine, assault said.

When all of his squad reported, Sahib switched the comm to the other squad leaders.

"Claw, Paw, Fang report." Sahib said.

"Claw squad ready, Alpha." Squad Leader Lee "Noose" Sato commed.

"Paw squad ready, Alpha." Squad Leader Lola "NGD" Petrov said.

"Fang squad ready, Alpha." Squad Leader Tucker "Cheat" Meyers responded.

"Good." Sahib said, then opened a channel to the drop ship pilots. "Wolf Platoon ready for deployment."

"Copy that Wolf. Initiating operation Downfall." A voice responded over the comms.

"Stupid name for the operation." SL Lola "NGD" Petrov grumbled.

"I agree, we should have called it something like Sky fall or Hammer of the Gods." Tucker "Cheat" Meyers added.

Sahib closed his eyes and tuned his people out, letting them chat. He felt the drop ship lift from the Monarch's hull and set out into space towards Trivax's lower orbit. Sahib reflected back to the moment he took a posting with the Exploration Fleet, he wanted to go see other worlds, meet new alien races. He knew that he had a much greater chance of doing that with the Exploration Fleet. It was a tough choice, his friend Adrian had offered him a place in his clan, Warpath. But Sahib refused him. Sahib wasn't like Adrian, he wasn't a warrior. Sahib was a soldier and he like being one. What Adrian wanted was different. So Sahib stayed with the army.

He felt a slight shake of the dropship entering the upper atmosphere, and he felt a rush of adrenaline. This was what he lived for.

“Wolf, prepare for the drop in twenty seconds.” A voice said over the comms.

Sahib steeled himself as he waited, the rest of his people quieted and waited as well.

“Dropping in five, four, three, two, one! Drop pods away.” Suddenly Sahib felt pressure pushing him downward toward the planet. The pod was away, speeding towards the ground, with each squad having a different landing zone. Sahib heard no sound, his suit’s helmet was blocking everything, but he could feel the vibrations. Soon he lost track of time as the vibrations intensified and then suddenly disappeared.

“Thirty seconds until landing burst.” A computer voice said. Sahib stiffened, the worst part was still ahead.

“Five seconds until burst, four, three, two, one! Engaging counter burst.”

Sahib’s entire body jerked, as the reverse thrusters and dampener field worked to counteract the incredible speed they were falling at. And then the pod hit the ground, and Sahib felt as if he was hit by a truck, thankfully the pod itself and his suit took on the brunt of the impact.

“Report.” Sahib managed to drawl out on the comm for his squad. A few seconds later, six people called in, and a few seconds after that the other squad leaders reported that their squads too landed safely. Sahib readied his weapon, the pod’s front panel exploded outward and he stepped onto the ground of Trivax. The other six pods landed around him, and they too had been opened, his squad mates already out.

All were in their battle-suits, although his squad had three different types of suits. The one he wore was a medium assault suit, meaning that it had hard plates over his vital areas, while joints were made out of carbon nano fiber mesh. It was powered by a small battery protected by the plate on the back, with features like two small tanks of nanites, one filled with repair nanites that could be sent anywhere through the suit to repair it, and others filled with medical nanites that could treat any wound. In order for it, and any other of the Empire’s suits to be used, the wearer had to possess a secondary implant with an access point at the back of the neck. This allowed the user to move in the suit as efficiently as if they were only in their own body. Sahib along with Red, Bella, and Garth were the ones in his squad equipped with the medium class battle-suit.

The next type was the heavy class battle-suit. It was bulky, covered in ri-steel plates and coated in heat resisting sheet of ceramics. These battle-suits had three extra batteries, gave the user much greater strength and speed at the expense of maneuverability. It

was worn by heavy infantry, in his team those being Loca and Lucky.

The final type, was the very different than the rest. It was the only suit that wasn't a hybrid between the Empire's and the Earth technology. It was the latest generation of the old Olympus battle-suits. The light class assault battle-suit rated for stealth. It had an amazing stealth system that let the light "pass" right through it, of course it was more complicated than that but Sahib didn't really need to understand it, just know how to use it. It too was powered, and while it did enhance the user's strength and speed it wasn't as powerful as the other battle-suits. The last member of his team – Eagle eye – wore a light assault battle-suit.

Sahib checked the battle map on his HUD, the Fleet Commander had acquired the plans to the city from few comm stations that were still operational on the planet. He looked at their objective, they were supposed to secure the courtyard of the Trivaxian Space Exploration Center. "Alright squad, you know the plan, let's move."

The seven of them started towards the huge complex, passing through narrow city streets. The Trivaxian architecture reminded him a lot of European architecture, a clash of cultures and ideas all mashed up together. The streets were empty, most of the population had evacuated even before the alien invaders reached Trivax, getting out of the cities. Only those in key positions remained, at least according to the people that they could get in contact with.

Then they arrived close enough to their destination that they could see the aliens preparing to enter the SEC building. His implant immediately counted all the aliens in his view, there were twenty three of them. The alien themselves wore a kind of battle-suit. It was dark red in color and appeared clunky. The general shape of the aliens was bipedal, with two arms, two legs, a head and a torso just like humans had, although they did appear taller than humans. And the shape of their helmets was more triangular, whether that was because of the shape of their head or a design Sahib couldn't tell.

"It looks like they are trying to enter the building." Eagle eye commented.

"The survivors must have blocked the entrances, see those containers over there?" Sahib asked gesturing, "Those must be heavy or breaching weapons, they are in a hurry to get them assembled."

"They are probably worried about some guys with big guns falling down on their heads." Loca said in a cheerful tone. Sahib nodded his head, they must know by now that their fleet was destroyed, and since they still didn't respond to the constant calls for surrender, the aliens most likely wanted hostages. "Alright, Bella, Garth you are going around these buildings and will come at them from the right side. Red and Lucky, the two of you are going here,

coming at them from the left. Loca and I are attacking them from the front. Eagle eye, you see that tall building over there?" Sahib asked, while highlighting, buildings, areas and routes on his HUD map. Eagle eye nodded her head. "Yes PL."

"Good, you get there and provide cover and support. Alright squad, let's do this quickly, efficiently, and bloody." Sahib said.

"Let's go wolfpack!" Loca said, and the rest joined in with their own cheer.

* * *

Five minutes later Bella and Garth were in position overlooking the aliens from the side building. All in all the aliens had a decent enough perimeter set up. They guarded their backs efficiently, Bella thought. But it was nothing special. They had no heavy weapons set up in the SEC building's courtyard except the one they were assembling to break into the building.

"What do you think they look like?" Bella asked in an excited tone.

"I don't really care, they are the bad guys." Garth answered with disinterest.

"I hope that they look like beautiful faeries." Bella added.

Garth turned to her and gave her a droll look of disbelief that was wasted on her as neither of them could see each other's face. "We are about to fight yet another alien race, and this is what you think about moments before battle."

"Imagine it," She said mesmerized, "faeries Garthy. Up until now we have never found another pretty race. Well, I'm not counting the Nel, since they are basically just us. But these are completely new aliens. They could look like anything, the possibilities are endless!" Bella exclaimed.

"Someone save me! Why am I always stuck with the princess?" Garth wallowed.

"Just because I like pretty things doesn't make me a princess! I'm a woman, I am entitled to looking feminine and liking nice things." She responded sullenly.

"I swear to all that is dear to me, you might be the as good of a soldier as any of us, but if have to watch you prance around the Monarch's decks in your frilly little dress on my off duty one more time, I'm going to kill myself." Garth retorted.

"Oh Garthy, I love you too!" Bella said smilingly.

Garth grumbled and cursed to himself, he tried to busy himself checking his assault rifle while Belle kept talking about alien faeries.

* * *

At the same time Red and Lucky were huddled behind a wall overlooking the SEC building from the other side. It seemed to a bit poorly planned on the side of Trivaxian's to have the headquarters of their space institute in the middle of a city, at least Red thought so. But then again, they aren't human. They didn't think alike, even though there were similarities between the two.

Red glanced at Lucky who was priming the charges in his rocket launcher. The RX-02 was the latest in infantry carried rocket launchers, carrying four small rockets with enough power to destroy a tank, too bad that the enemy didn't have any of those. Red's own main weapon was a standard NR-14 assault rifle filled with conventional cased metal slugs as ammo. The technology might be ancient by now, but it was still extremely effective. NR-14 worked similarly to a rail gun, combining magnetic fields and compressed gas in order to propel the slug at the enemy.

"You remember when we fought Sowir on Nuva, thirty years ago?" Lucky asked in his slow deliberate drawl.

"Yup." Red answered.

"They weren't much of a challenge." He added slowly.

"Mhm…" Red retorted.

"I hope these guys are better." Lucky concluded nodding as he finished priming the last charge.

Red gave a noncommittal grunt as an answer. It mattered little to him, he was here to do a job, nothing more, nothing less.

* * *

Sahib waited in silence and watched the progress of his people on his battle-map. All save for Eagle eye were in positions. But according to her movements she would reach her spot soon. Sahib checked his weapons power source, then ammo canister, and lastly the casing canister, making sure that all were placed properly inside his NP-04 plasma rifle.

The rifle he was holding in his hands was an improvement on the Earth's design – the SH-07 plasma rifle. The main improvements that the Empire made were in range, bolt heat and firing speed. The weapon was still a bit of a bother to maintain, as one had three different things to worry about. The rifle obviously needed a power source, whose main problem was overheating as the rifle was used, but it could hold out for a respectable amount of time before needing to change or cool off. The second was the gas canister, basically the

rifle's ammo. Highly compressed gas that was superheated with powerful magnetic fields in order to get plasma. And the last part, the casing of the plasma. In of itself the plasma was relatively hard to control, if it was fired without any kind of containment it would spread, disperse, and lose its effectiveness relatively quickly.

The Earth version of the gun used a kind of magnetic field to contain the bolt long enough for it to reach its target, but it didn't have a very good range, the field couldn't survive long enough for targets farther away, making it a devastating short range weapon. The Empire went through another route. They had developed a highly heat resistant plastic sheet in which the plasma would be coated and fired. The plasma would of course burn the plastic away eventually, or it will break upon impact, but it increased the weapon's effectiveness to mid-range. As the bolt of plasma was fired it would impact the sheet of plasma just outside of the heating chamber. As it traveled down the barrel the sheet would wrap around the bolt and provide containment as it exits the rifle. All in all it was a good weapon, if a bit high maintenance.

When he finished with his weapon, Sahib glanced at Maria Luisa "Loca", and saw her staring at her own weapon, the CFG-02 heavy rifle, perhaps the most unique of his squad's weapons. The CFG-02 was a rifle that used centrifugal force as a way of firing bullets. It allowed for high speed, no recoil, and no muzzle flash firing of bullets at the enemy. The rifle had a "fat" middle, where a large magnetic wheel with bullets was placed. The wheel was capable of turning at amazing speeds, which meant that when the field released bullets they flew out at speeds that could rival any other conventional rifle. The other thing that made it a great weapon, was the rate of fire. It could fire a bullet every 0.15 seconds, for 400 bullets fired every minute. With its ammo supply of 2000 bullets it made for a formidable weapon.

Raising his head from Loca's weapon, Sahib noticed that her head was pointed in his direction. She then glanced at the aliens and back again.

"Hey, boss. Do you think that I could take all those bastards on by myself?" Loca said, living up to her nickname – Crazy.

"Probably, but you know that in this squad we share." Sahib answered.

"Hm… Yeah, it wouldn't be fair to the others. You're right." She said and then grew quiet. Sahib sighed, his team was full of insane and weird. At least he had Misty, she was the only one among them who was normal.

* * *

Misty “Eagle eye” Ryss climbed through the Trivaxian building with her suits full stealth turned on. The suits stealth was near perfect, and even if someone looked straight at her it was doubtful that they would see her. On the other hand, her suit did nothing to mask sound, even though there existed suits that were capable of limited sound muffling back home. It didn’t really matter anyway, Eagle eye walked quickly with carefully placed steps that made almost no sound.

She was a soft breeze, passing through unseen leaving only a whisper of her existence. The empty stairs of the Trivaxian building finally led her to the roof of the building. She stepped out of into the light that bent around her. She approached the edge and saw the aliens still working furiously on getting their heavy weapon operational. She concluded that it wasn’t supposed to be used in such manner, it was most likely designated as a defense weapon for after they took the building. They underestimated the Trivaxian’s, and now needed to repurpose the weapon in order to get inside the building.

She knelt at the edge and reached behind her, she moved her hand below the thin material that camouflaged her weapon. She retrieved her Mag-35 sniper rifle and placed its bipod on the edge. The rifle had no scope, instead it had a small camera at the top that feed directly through her suit to her HUD. On her helmet she saw a small window that zoomed in and looked at the alien positions at her thought. Using her military implant, she marked the enemies highlighting them with a soft blue outline, while also taking in every detail of the area beneath her. After she cataloged all points of interest in her mind, while adding cute names to her alien targets.

“You are Snuggles, and you will be Mr. Tickles, and you there look like a Piggy.” She whispered to herself, “And the two of you will be Dorothy and Kenny.” She continued until she named them all, then reported that she was ready and settled in to wait for her Platoon Leaders orders.

* * *

Lucky raised his head from his weapon as he heard his leader speak over the squad comms.

“Alright, everybody is in positions. Lucky you are up first, we need a distraction. Bella, Garth, the two of you hit them from the side while they are distracted, Eagle eye picks off targets of opportunity and provide assistance if necessary. Loca and I will hit them from the front. Clear?” Sahib asked.

Affirmatives rang out through the channel, and Sahib gave Lucky the go ahead.

Lucky mounted his weapon on his shoulder took a deep breath and then stepped out of cover. With his implant he chose two targets for his missiles. The alien heavy weapon and the wall behind which a few of the aliens were. With a thought he triggered the weapon, and two missiles rushed out of his launcher.

* * *

Bella watched as two missiles hit and exploded in the alien perimeter. Immediately both her and Garth left their covers and ran across the street towards the enemy positions. The aliens were all startled, and looking in the direction from which the missiles came. That let Garth and her get close range. As soon as they were close enough to ensure maximum accuracy, both of them opened fire on unsuspecting aliens.

* * *

As soon as he heard two explosions, Sahib exited cover, Loca running by his side. As they crossed halfway across the street Loca slowed readied her weapon and opened fire. A soft buzzing sound came out of it, and then thunderous rifle fire as bullets started flying out of it. The weapon fire hit the unsuspecting targets and cut right through their armor. A few of the aliens turned towards her and started raising their weapons to fire, but they had no chance. Before they could fire, Sahib had already pressed the trigger of his own weapon. The magnetic fields superheated the gas and sent the plasma forward, the plastic wrapped around the plasma, and gave it a teardrop shape. It crossed the distance to the target in an instant, it hit the alien armor and the containment shattered. Plasma now free, punched a hole through it and entered the alien's body. The alien fell down, its organs liquefied, a yellowish mist of blood vapor rose from the hole in its chest.

Before its body hit the ground Sahib fired two more shots at the other aliens, each to the same effect. A few more aliens who had tried to respond had their heads blown off by Eagle eye's sniper fire. Within thirty seconds, twenty three aliens lay dead.

The group approached the dead aliens and then stopped to inspect their bodies. On the first look the battle suits of the aliens appeared to have been under power. And the aliens did look like they were a bit taller than an average human or Nel. Sahib noticed Bella kneeling close to one of the aliens trying to get his helmet off.

“Definitely could have taken them all by myself.” Loca said.

“No challenge…” He heard Lucky add over the comms, and then Red respond with his usual grunt.

Then Bella finally managed to get the alien’s helmet off.

“Ahh! They’re not faeries Garthy! More like birdies!” Bella exclaimed. Sahib was just about to ask her what she meant when he noticed Garth turning around and walking to the other side of the courtyard, as far away from Bella as he could. He realized then, that he probably didn’t want to know.

* * *

Tofor and his people were startled by two explosions that shook the building, fearing that the aliens had finally managed to get inside they prepared to fight for their lives. But the explosions were followed by weapons fire, and they quickly realized that they weren’t coming from the inside of the building. Tofor rushed to the monitors and accessed cameras looking at the building’s entrance, they were all too scared to look before, but now he needed to know what was happening.

The feed appeared on the monitor and Tofor watched stunned at the sight before him. The aliens lay dead on the ground, and around them seven armed figures stood. Immediately Tofor took in their shape, and realized who they must be. Then one of his people shouted. “Director we are getting a radio transmission on our emergency frequency!”

Tofor walked over and the woman played it. “*Attention, this is Platoon Leader Adin of the Empire. The enemy had been eliminated, you are clear. I repeat you are clear.*”

Tofor felt his legs give out and he dropped into a nearby chair. He covered his eyes with his upper hands. The help had arrived.

* * *

Eight hours later – Monarch

Johanna watched on the holo as her people brought the five of the captured alien ships to her fleet. The ships that she had sent to Rofvax, had also dispatched the ships there, and captured most of the people that the aliens had on the ground. Sadly the colonists were all killed, apparently the aliens tortured them for information and then killed them all. Johanna didn’t know what to think about these aliens, there didn’t seem to be any reason for what they had done. But she

will learn soon enough, once they start interrogating the prisoners. And they had plenty.

The Trivaxian's on the other hand had been hit hard. Before Johanna arrived the invaders had bombed most of their cities. Fortunately, most of the people had evacuated out of the cities. But not everyone wanted or was able to leave. The death count was still uncertain, but according to their preliminary numbers the aliens had killed more than a fifth of their total population, along with most of their leaders. Johanna knew that if she hadn't arrived that number would have been total. The actions prior to her arrival told her that their plan was to kill the entire population slowly at their leisure.

Now when the fighting was finally over, her people were involved in the rescue operations across the planet. And soon she would need to meet with the Trivaxian leaders. She had sent word back to Sanctuary, asking for guidance. But for now there was nothing else she could do. Slowly she stood from her chair, feeling her legs shake from an extended period of sitting. She turned to Andros, the commander of the Monarch. He too had been in his chair from the moment they came into the system, but she knew that he would remain in the CC for a while more.

"You have the command of the fleet Andros." Johanna said weakly, then not waiting for his response left the CC and headed straight for her quarters. Every step sending pain running through her body. Once she finally entered her quarters, she sped straight to the bathroom where she immediately dropped by the toilet and proceeded to empty the contents of her stomach. After there was nothing else to puke out, she retched on empty while tears leaked freely from her eyes. It took her at least twenty minutes to calm down enough to take her clothes off and enter the shower. She let the water flow over her as she shook and cried.

She was able to keep herself together while the fleet was in action, but the moment she knew that there was nothing else for her to do, she fell apart. Memories stabbed through her mind, of a Ra'a'zani ship and the ships she lost. The cries of people from Earth, as they called her ship to help them while their own planet turned against them. The memory of her ignoring their pleas, but listening to every one of them, each plea carved into her soul. She hugged herself and dropped to the floor, as the water ran over her.

She knew that there was nothing that she could have done differently, she was not responsible for the people that died today. But knowing something and believing it was two different things. Eventually she managed to gather herself enough to wipe herself off and get to her bed. She grabbed a bottle of pills by it and the promise of dreamless sleep they offered.

Chapter Fourteen

Four days later – Dreadnought Monarch – Trivax orbit

Johanna sat in the meeting room aboard the Monarch. Three representatives of the Trivaxians, Director Tofor of SEI, Leader Riven – the only female of the three, and Commander Quvor sat across from Johanna's diplomatic leads, Envoy Park Chung-Ah and Envoy Esama.

"*We appreciate all the help you have given to our people.*" The Trivaxian group's leader, Director Tofor said in his language, and the translating device built into the table translated the words to standard.

"It is the least we could do." Johanna said, and waited as the translator relayed her words in the Trivaxian language.

"No. You don't owe us anything." Tofor said, his ears flapping around. *"Have you found out the reason why the aliens attacked us?"* The Empire's people transformed the former colony on Rofvax into a kind of a prison facility for the some three hundred alien invaders.

"We are still questioning them, as soon as we know for sure you will know." Johanna answered.

"You warned us. Thirty years ago, you warned us that the galaxy was a dangerous place, and we should have listened." Tofor said.

"I couldn't have imagined that this would have happened. If I had suspected I would have done things differently…" Johanna said. The Trivaxian's listened the translation, and then kept silent. A few moments later Leader Riven turned her slender head towards Johanna and spoke.

"*There are some among us that blame you for what has happened.*" She said.

"We didn't even know that these aliens existed. It is not our fault that they found you." Envoy Park Chung-Ah interceded.

"Of course, we understand that. The ones that blame you, believe that your fault lies in not giving us more of your technology instead of riddles and concepts." Leader Riven said.

Johanna immediately responded. "Even the small amount of data that I gave you had turned your society on its head, who knows what would have happened if I gave you more. And more to the point, at the time I knew very little about you. For I know you could have turned out to be no better than the aliens that attacked you. If I had given you more, it could have been you who attacked another race." She said angrily.

Stunned the three Trivaxians looked at each other for a moment before responding. "*We would have never attacked another living being without cause!*" Commander Quvor said.

"Perhaps, but you are still a young race. I have seen your history,

it is a peaceful one. You don't know the true horrors of war, and temptations that come from knowing that you have the ability to take something from those weaker." Johanna shook her head. "My people might not have been in space for a long time. But our history is filled with grief, war, and examples of people succumbing to those temptations. We have learned our lessons well. You are ignorant, still innocent."

"We are not innocent any longer." Director Tofor added.

Johanna smiled sadly, "If only you knew how wrong you are. What has happened to you was terrible, unforgivable. But you escaped a far worse fate." She said, her eyes losing focus.

"Have you come to a decision?" Leader Riven asked, bringing Johanna back from her recollections.

"The Emperor had spoken with the leaders of the Empire. It has been decided that we will offer you a place in the Empire. If you accept, we will give you our technology and you will be given a status of a clan and all the protections and responsibilities that entails, but the price will be your way of life. Your children will be taught the ways of the Empire, and you will be required to abandon your ways. If you refuse we will still give our protection, but your path to the stars will be your own. We will not meddle in your civilization nor will we give you any advanced technologies, we would still be open to trade, but that will be only for materials and other non-technological products." Johanna said.

After listening to the translation, the three Trivaxians looked at each other and conferred silently. *"We will need to think about this."* Leader Riven said.

"Of course, you can have as much time to decide as you wish. For now my ships will stay here until reinforcements from the Empire arrive, by then we should have the locations of the invaders worlds, and we will pay them a visit." Johanna said, and with that stood and left the room, leaving the three aliens with her two diplomatic envoys to answer any other questions they might have.

* * *

A few hours later the three Trivaxians were back on their planet, brought back by the Empire's shuttle. They were sitting in the temporary government building. The three of them were for all intense and purposes in charge. The Trivaxian government never was big, and the aliens managed to kill most of them in their bombardment.

"What do you think about their offer Tofor?" Riven asked.

Tofor reached with his upper left arm and scratched his ear. “I don’t know Riven, it is not something that we should decide on quickly. I haven’t even read through all the requirements and obligations that we will be bound to if we decide to join them. And frankly what I have read seems very harsh.” He answered.

“How so?” Quvor asked.

“If we join them, the Trivaxian civilization will cease to be, we will become the Empire. Our young will be raised in the Empire’s ways, taught their history. Sure they would teach the history of Trivax too, but it will be only a chapter in the grander history of the Empire. Our way of life will change, some of our culture might be adopted into the Empire, but they will not allow dissidents. We will need to change in order to fit in.” Tofor answered.

“And is that such a bad thing?” Riven asked.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I don’t know, and that is the problem.” Tofor said.

“The Trivaxian history won’t disappear Tofor. We would only be trading the future of Trivaxians, for a life under the Empire. Would we not advance far more quickly as a part of them? Would we not colonize and spread to the stars?” Riven added.

Tofor remained quiet.

“I for one am for us joining them.” Quvor said.

“Why?” Tofor asked.

“Because I don’t want this situation to repeat itself ever again. We were so inferior Tofor, if it weren’t for the Empire we would be dead now. If we didn’t meet them thirty years ago, we would have only fallen faster. They were right the universe is a dangerous place, and I don’t wish to see any more of our people die.” Quvor answered.

Riven crossed her lower arms across her chest and spoke. “We need to think this true thoroughly. To speak with the people, and decide what the best course of action is.”

* * *

Five days later – Empire’s prison camp – Rofvax

High Prime Nicolet Francis sat in the small interrogation room, across from her sat one of the alien prisoners. The aliens were all more than two meters tall, spindly, they walked hunched forward. They had dark brown skin, with feather like coverings on their heads and around their faces, and along the sides of their arms and legs. They wore clothing provided by the Empire that was more like a long sheet which they wrapped around their bodies.

The alien head was triangular, wider on top and narrower at the

bottom, with a beak like mouth that had teeth. Their eyes were sunken in their skulls, similarly to humans or Nel. Their fingers ended in talons. They looked menacing and powerful. Which was actually misleading as they were weaker than an average human or Nel. The alien bones were semi-hollow, probably remnants from a time when they could fly. Their muscles nowhere near as strong as human's, the result of a lower gravity home world. Outside of their armored suits they were no threat.

Nicolet stared at the alien that was silently studying her. The individual across from her was male, and the highest ranking survivor of the invading fleet. Nicolet's job was to get as much information she could from him. They had already hacked their computers and learned much from their databases. The race called itself Furvor. There wasn't really anything that they needed from the prisoners, they already knew the location of their home world and their colony. Just as they knew that they had planned on wiping out the Trivaxian's and taking their planet. The things Nicolet needed from him were of another nature. She needed to get a feel for the alien's temperament, their customs and beliefs. The Emperor had already decided on what they will do with them, but the more they learned about them the easier their job will be.

"Tell me Wing Leader, why did you attack the Trivaxian's without a cause?" Nicolet said in standard and the translator built into the table translated the words into the alien's language. The bird like alien listened, cocked his head and responded.

"They were in the way." Wing Leader responded.

"In the way of what?"

"Their planet is suitable for my people, we wanted it for ourselves."

"But it was already occupied. Couldn't you have gone around them? Or engaged in peaceful trade with Trivax?"

"What is trade?" The alien said, or tried. Butchering the unfamiliar word.

"Trade, it means giving something in return for something else that you need."

"Why would we do that? They were weaker than us, and we needed another world. Our worlds had become overpopulated, a new world was necessary."

Nicolet sighed. "You don't see anything wrong with what you did, do you?"

"We had a need and means to get what we need. Why shouldn't we take what we want?"

"Because it isn't right. You say that you are stronger than Trivaxians, but what about us? You are weaker than the Empire,

should we come and take you worlds simply because we can?"

The alien listened to the translation and then remained silent, thinking. "It is within your power. Will you?" He asked hesitantly.

Nicolet shook her head in a gesture that was wasted on the alien. "No. Because it isn't right, we don't go around killing people when they pose no threat to us. But you are dangerous, and can't be allowed to run free across the galaxy."

"So you will kill us?"

"No, but we will take away your ability to harm anyone else." Nicolet said, then she stood and left the interrogation room. There was nothing else that she needed to know.

Chapter Fifteen

April; Year 31 – Warpath

Adrian rolled to the side as another spike slammed down at the place his head was a moment ago. He twisted and managed to come to his feet, only to be swiped away by a clawed arm, resembling that of a scorpion. At the last moment Adrian managed to put his hands in front of himself and block some of the attack's force, which was considerable. He flew back, and then hit the floor hard with his back, losing his breath.

He heard a series of steps, hitting the floor far too close to each other for any human, just as he felt the vibrations from the floor. He turned his head to see a large arthropod like creature bearing down at him. He waited until it was close enough to touch and then he moved. He rolled below the arm that was coming down at him, and then got into a kneeling position. The Arthropod tried to move back, but Adrian swiped two out of its four legs from the outside to the inside. The Arthropod lost balance and fell on its side. Adrian moved quickly behind it and grabbed the big triangular plate on the top of its head.

As soon as he did that the Arthropod froze, and then a breath later, a series of clicks and lisping sounds came out of the Arthropod's mouth. As soon as the sounds stopped, Adrian let out a big laugh.

"I believe that it is the other way around, four wins for me and three for you." He said and released the Arthropod. The Guxcacul rose to his feet, his triangular head now standing about half a meter above Adrian's own. The Guxcacul had fourteen limbs, seven on each side. Eight of the limbs for moving around, and six as arms.

The lowest set of arms was the smallest, branch like arms that were flesh over bone like human arms, and these were the arms that had finger like appendages with two equivalents of human thumbs on each hand along with three additional fingers that they used for handling delicate work. The middle set was long spikes with two joints, the tips of the spikes were hollow and inside were three slim tentacle like fingers that could also aid in delicate tasks.

The top set looked very similar to the claws of Earth scorpions, only maybe a bit smaller and better proportioned to the Guxcacul's bodies. The adult Guxcacul males were all about the same size, they didn't have as much variations as humans and Nel had. Their legs kept the back part of their body about a meter off the ground, and their front part added another meter in height. The front part, the torso with their arm limbs was upright and with the head about a meter and thirty centimeters long, while their back was parallel to the ground and about the same length. From the end to the top of their head the

Guxcacul were about three meters long, with their torso upright they were about half that.

They weren't that much bigger than a human, but they weighed about twice as much as one. Most of their weight came from the hard plates that protected their weaker flesh. The head was made out of the triangular shaped plate on top of the flesh head, with two eyes that peaked out of the head shell, and a mouth with two short mandibles.

Guxcacul started moving towards the exit of the small sparring room while again speaking in a series of clicks and lisps.

"Come now Riss, don't be a sore loser. You could have had me if you had just watched your legs, I keep telling you that is your weak point." Adrian answered. He had long ago learned Guxcacul language, and the Guxcacul that Adrian called Riss (his real name is unpronounceable by human or Nel) had long ago learned standard. The two communicated with each other while each spoke in their native tongue.

"*You alone have reflexes fast enough to take advantage of that weakness, I can spar with none of the others, lest I seriously injure them.*" Riss said in his language.

"True. But a true warrior seeks to improve himself regardless of the need for it." Adrian retorted. Riss released sound that was the Guxcacul equivalent of exasperation.

"You might face an opponent in the future that will be able to take advantage of your weakness. You need to work on it." Adrian added, as Riss came to their lockers he took out a translator device and attached it to his chest plate. He used it to communicate with most everyone other than Adrian and a select few. The translator was connected to Riss's implant, and it translated the words the moment he spoke them with no delay. It took Empire a couple of years to design implants for the Guxcacul, for Nel it was much easier as they were very similar to humans. And as the Mtural survivors refused the offer of implants, they had a lot more time to focus on Guxcacul.

Riss was the only Guxcacul that had joined Warpath. He was unique among his own kind, as Guxcacul generally didn't value the individual as much as humans and Nel, and they weren't really warriors in the sense that was familiar to humans. But when he asked, Adrian accepted. Since then Riss had become one of the best warriors of Warpath, if albeit a bit strange.

"I know that you are right," Riss said and his translator spoke the words in standard. "But there is too much to do, and too little time. I am pressed to familiarize myself with the Titan, and I am also overseeing the finishing touches." He said.

Adrian sighed, he sometimes forgot that he was the only one with the advantage of mind space. He knew that Riss was busy with his

ship. Riss was also one of the commanders of the ten ships that were now almost finished.

"Yeah, I know. The Titan needs to be your priority, but afterwards I want you to focus on your craft a bit more."

"Yes Clan Leader." Riss said, and only the fact that Adrian knew him very well allowed him to know that the tone was mocking.

"Yes, you will follow orders. Unless you want me to keep reminding you about your weakness for all eternity." Adrian said grinning. Riss too had gone through the immortality gene therapy and would not age. With the Empire's genetic knowledge it was only a matter of identifying the right markers and altering them slightly to remove cellular degradation. And it was also much easier to achieve in Guxcacul, as they were already long lived, with an average life span being three thousand years. Riss was also the only Guxcacul that went through the therapy. The other Guxcacul survivors had refused, just like the Mtural did. Adrian's wolion companions, Sora and Akash also went through the therapy, and will live as long as Adrian did.

As soon as the two walked out of the sparring room, Riss turned his triangular head to Adrian. "I must leave you now Adrian, I need to check the progress on Titan's propulsion systems."

"Of course Riss, I'll see you later." Adrian said. He too had responsibilities. Adrian headed towards his quarters for a quick shower, and then went to the Forge.

* * *

Adrian entered the research center, immediately seeing Isani, head researcher Grace and Alexander – his old friend from the academy back on Earth, now Alexander was one of the most prominent doctors in Warpath. The three were engaged in a serious talk, but as soon as they saw Adrian they stopped and turned to him. Isani approached him first.

"I think that perhaps we should delay this test, at least until we manage to reduce the information load."

"The projections say that my mind should be able to handle it. Right Grace?" Adrian retorted.

"Technically, yes. But this load would be enough to render any other person unconscious. The only reason you can, is because of the abilities that we can't even begin to understand." Grace answered.

"Not understanding them doesn't mean that I can't use them." Adrian said.

"Adrian, we can't predict what this will do to you." Alexander started speaking, "It could very well be that everything goes over fine,

but we just can't be sure. The input is too much right now, we need to either lower it or find a way to make it easier for the brain to interpret."

"If we lower the information input the Watchtower interface becomes useless, we might as well keep using the command boards. No, we need this, you know why we need it, and for now I am the only one who can use it." Adrian said.

Isani shook his head and his tail swung from one side to the other in agitation. "You will kill yourself one day if you keep pushing yourself blindly."

"They could be right Adrian." Iris chimed in his head. *"We don't know what this can do to you."*

"I will not let fear keep me from moving forward Iris. This is dangerous, yes. But no great leap is without risk." Adrian said to Iris, then looked at his friend. "Ah, that is where you are wrong my friend. It is the only way I know of growing beyond my limits, I push so that others have a way to follow behind me. This is no different." Adrian said.

"They might not be able to stop you from doing this Adrian, but I can." Alexander said slowly, Adrian turned to him to respond but Alex raised his hand to forestall him. "I will not, I just want to know you that I can. I am your doctor, and you need to respect the boundaries I set for you. You can try the Watchtower, but I will be monitoring your stats, if at any point I think that your life is in danger I will pull you out. Understood?"

Adrian watched his friend coolly, and then after a tense few moment raised his hand and flipped his palm from side to side agreeing.

"Good." Alexander said. They moved towards the room where the interface itself was. They entered the room over-looking the interface first. The room was filled with people, measuring equipment and computers. Through a glass window Adrian could see the interface down in the adjacent room. Only a simple chair, the rest of the interface was in the walls and below the floor.

"What have you prepared?" Adrian asked, while his hand strayed to the back of his neck and the relatively fresh access point implanted there.

"A Fictional scenario. You will be commanding a fleet of ten ships against fifty in an inhabited system." Grace answered.

"Alright. Let's start." Adrian said and moved through the doorway to the room below. He reached the chair and sat down. The chair restraints moved over Adrian and secured him to it, first his body, then his head. He then felt a prick at the back of his neck, at the access point for the Watchtower. The access point was a direct

connection to Adrian's brain and his implant, on its own it did nothing, but coupled with something like Watchtower it had great potential.

Adrian felt it when the chair's connector secured the connection with his access point. It felt like a bite from a small insect.

"*Are you ready Adrian?*" Grace asked over the speakers.

"Yes." Adrian answered.

"I hope that we come out of this whole…" Iris said worryingly.

"Aren't you the one that always wants to try new things?" Adrian asked.

"Establishing the link!" A voice said over the speakers.

"I like trying new things but not when—" Whatever Iris was about to say was lost, as Adrian felt something switch in his brain, he felt the link between the Watchtower and his brain initiate. And in the next moment he screamed.

* * *

Sometime later Adrian became aware of himself again, he had no concept of how much time had passed, he could only remember the pain unlike any he had ever felt. He opened his eyes and saw that he was no longer in the Watchtower room, instead there was nothing around him. He floated in nothingness. He could see his body, but nothing else. Then he became aware of two distinct voices calling out to him.

"I'm here!" He yelled out, and something changed, he felt more like himself. And the voices became more solid.

"**Adrian? Are you alright? We detected a surge in your vitals.**" Alexander's voice asked.

"I'm fine. How long was I out?" Adrian asked. He didn't really talk, he thought about what he wanted to say and Watchtower and his mind did the rest.

"**Out? What do you mean, we just initiated the link.**" Alexander said.

"Oh. Good then." Adrian said. Then another voice sounded out.

"Adrian?" It said softly, timidly. Unlike Alexander's voice, this one seemed to come from somewhere close to him. Adrian turned around and saw a shape standing behind him. It was female in appearance, its skin a living flame.

*"*Iris?*"* Adrian asked, stunned.

"Um… Yes, it's me." She turned her head – that was on fire, and looked down on her nude body. "Well, this is what you imagine me like?" She asked coyly.

Stunned Adrian's mind went into overdrive. He knew that the Watchtower was designed to give the brain the ability to shape the information and present it in a way that he could understand. But Iris wasn't a part of the interface, she shouldn't be able to manifest through his imagination as a person, only a voice. Then he took a better look at her. He was immediately certain that the body was created by his mind, her features were those of two women that influenced his life the most, Bethany and Laura. Iris was a mesh of the two of them.

"Well, I guess." Adrian answered weakly.

"I'm on fire Adrian. Seriously?" Iris said in an annoyed tone.

"Well, it isn't exactly my fault."

"Whatever." She said and then proceeded to inspect her body.

"Wait, how can you even see yourself? I can understand me seeing you as a body, but you?"

"I don't know Adrian, I had stopped trying to explain things that happen to the two of us long ago."

"**Adrian? We can bring the program online now, are you ready?**" Grace asked.

Adrian steeled himself, as much as he could now that he was within his own mind. He remembered what the Watchtower was capable of. He concentrated and without speaking sent the go ahead.

"**Bringing the Watchtower fully online in ten seconds. Five, four, three, two, one!**"

Adrian's surroundings changed, he now floated among stars. Planets, space stations, ships, all appeared around him. And he knew everything about them, everything that his ships could scan. He knew his ships, he knew every weapon they had, he knew the ranges between every object in system, and he could see their movements, project their most probable courses. The information threatened to overwhelm him, he felt an echo of pain, but he ignored it.

"Whoa." Adrian whispered.

"Whoa indeed." Iris chimed in.

"Let's see what this thing can do."

Adrian started issuing orders to his ships. It was as easy as it was to use his implant, he controlled everything with his thoughts. The ships were simulated, just like their crews were, but he still got communications from the commanding officers, acknowledging his orders. He "heard" them all. He watched as ships under his commander moved on his orders.

The orders were relayed via FTL comms and a system similar to the command board that commanders of fleets used. The difference was that by using Watchtower Adrian was able to focus on more things at once, he could send multiple orders at the same time and

access information the moment it was available. Everything that the ship scanners saw he saw. Every detail about every ship under his control he knew.

“This is awesome Adrian!” Iris said. She through him could see everything he could.

Adrian watched as his ships neared the enemy. He saw a slight change in the enemy formation, and he could clearly see the beginning of a trap. He adjusted his ships formation to catch the enemy off guard. Then he waited as the enemy tried to spring its trap, only for his ships to turn it against them. The battle was in its full swing when the pain returned.

“**Adrian, how are you feeling? We are detecting some erratic brain activity.**” Alexander said.

“Just some pain, it’s nothing I can’t take it.” Adrian said.

“**Adrian—**”

“It’s nothing!” Adrian said. Alexander remained silent.

But as more and more time passed, and more and more enemy ships came into range flooding the battlefield with their weapons and additional information for Adrian’s brain to handle the pain got worse and worse.

“Are you alright Adrian?” Iris asked, worried. But Adrian couldn’t respond from the pain. He tried to push it aside, but the more he struggled the stronger it became. And then finally it intensified to such extent that he could no longer see anything on the battlefield, his mind froze.

“**I’m pulling you out Adrian!**” Someone said, but Adrian was too far gone to respond, the pain swallowed him and he lost consciousness.

Chapter Sixteen

Adrian opened his eyes slowly. He had a painful headache and didn't even want to try and move his head. The room he was in was dimly lit, for which he was thankful. He realized that he was in a hospital bed. He released a gasp as the pain intensified for a moment. Then he felt a weight on his leg and the pain dimmed a bit. Adrian turned his eyes down and saw Sora's head leaned on his legs, and Akash standing with his two front legs on the end of his bed. He smiled at them.

"Oh good, you are awake." Iris's voice said in his head.

"Yeah… How long was I out?" Adrian asked via his implant, as he didn't trust himself to try and speak out loud.

"A little more than a day. I commed Alexander he should be here soon." Iris said. Then the doors to the room opened and Alexander walked in with a white coat over his skin-suit.

"Well, it's a good sign that you woke up at least." He noted as he walked to the side of the bed and placed some kind of device on Adrian's neck. "Your vitals are normal, there are still some fluctuations in your brainwaves but they are slowly returning to normal."

"What happened?" Adrian managed to ask.

"The information load was too much." Alexander said, in a tone that conveyed his 'I told you so' meaning clearly.

"How long was I able to handle it?"

"Thirty minutes from connection, twenty from the start of the simulation."

"I remember the pain, but not much else…" Adrian said.

"We don't know exactly what happened. What we do know is that at some point the load became too much for your brain to handle, your brain temperature started rising, and we detected a… alteration in your brain waves."

"Alteration?"

"We don't know what it was, no one has ever seen anything like it. It could be because of your already unique state, but we just couldn't risk letting you stay connected any longer." Alexander answered.

Adrian just nodded, and suffered through one more stab of pain.

"Anyways, you should be fine in a few days. Until then you are going to stay here in this bed where we can monitor you." Alex said.

"Yes mother." Adrian said mockingly, Alex snorted and left the room.

"Well guys, it looks like it is just you and me now." He said

looking at the two wolions. Akash came closer and sniffed him a bit, then turned and left the room. Sora watched him go, and then turned and settled on the floor beside his bed.

"So… You think we are going to do that again anytime soon? I liked having a body." Iris chimed in cheerfully.

* * *

Two weeks later, Adrian was almost fully recovered, an unusual fluctuation in his brain waves persisted, but as no one knew what it was and it didn't seem lethal as every other test they ran came back good, he was let go. His brain scans were sent forward to Sanctuary for further analysis. Now Adrian sat in a meeting with Isani and Warpath chief ship builders.

"Have you gone completely insane?" Isani asked his palm making a gesture for a crazy person.

"No." Adrian said offended. "I am the same as I always am."

"Then you were always crazy." Isani added.

"I already told you why we need it, without it the fleet will never operate at its full capacity."

"The ships you are talking about are already the most advanced ships we have ever created! Actually, they are the most advanced ships built by any race we have ever encountered, and that includes the Ra'a'zani!" Isani yelled out. "In any case we can't use it, and if you try you will end up in a hospital bed again!"

"Just because we can't use it now, doesn't mean that we never will. We might figure it out before our ships even see combat." Adrian argued.

"Well then we can put it in later, when we find the solution." Isani said.

"Why? We can easily put it in now. Why make more work for ourselves later."

Isani glared at him, then finally sighed and relented. "Fine! You can have the system installed. But you will not try to use it again until we fix the problem."

"Of course. I am not suicidal."

"Then let us go on to the next point on the agenda." Isani said, then cleared his throat. "The Titan, Tiamat, Specter, and Lighthouse will all be finished by the end of August. The Valhalla, Twilight, Retribution, my Invictus, and Ras'tar by the end of September. Your ship will be the last to be finished. The Harbinger will be done by the end of October." Adrian was a bit needled that Isani's ship Invictus would be finished before his but he nodded.

“Good, the Sowir are still waiting, but I don’t think that it will be much longer now. They have over sixteen hundred ships not counting their auxiliaries, and the influx of ships had slowed considerably.”

“Yes I agree. But even if they started towards Nelus today it will still take them about six months to get there as they are limited to hyperspace. We will have plenty of time to finish the ships and get there at the start of their siege. Trans-lane travel form Warpath to Nelus is twelve days.” Isani added.

“I doubt that they will wait until the end of the year. In a two, maybe three months they will be ready.” Adrian said. “Okay, let’s see what’s next on the agenda…” He quickly moved on to the next topic on his implant. “The MD cannon.” He said looking at Chief Lasani.

Lasani cleared her throat and with a flick of a hand changed the holo image to that of the weapon.

“Well, we ran into a bit of a problem. We still have no idea how the Ra’a’zani main weapon does what it does, if we had recovered the weapon intact we might have been able to replicate it. Our version of their weapon doesn’t “eat” through matter it impacts with, but rather weakens the molecular bonds. We don’t have the technology yet to break the bonds outright, but a weakened enemy hull will be much easier to defeat.”

“I knew that already.” Adrian added.

“Yes, well the problem we ran into is power. We greatly underestimated the power needed to fire the weapon. We can’t mount it on most of our ships.” Lasani said.

“Most of our ships?” Adrian asked.

“The only two ships that have enough power requirements are Titan and Tiamat, those two ships were designed as fleet’s bulwarks and their job is to take on enemy fire. For that reason we added three extra generators to help with the power requirements of the field defenses. The two ships can fire the molecular disruption cannon, but only if we also add dedicated power batteries for the weapons. And even if we did add them, they will only be able to fire once every ten minutes, that is the time needed for the ship’s power generators to recharge the battery enough for the weapon to be fired, without compromising the other systems.”

“Can’t we put the batteries on other ships?” Adrian asked.

“No, we can’t add any more power sources on the other ships, the Tiamat and the Titian were designed for more, and the others just don’t have the room. Which means that the recharge time would be around an hour. Perhaps if we ever get more efficient power generators, we could add them. For now there is no point, the weapon itself will not damage the opponent, just weaken the hull integrity.” Lasani said.

“I really wanted those cannons on all ships…” Adrian said disappointed.

“The two ships will be enough. All of our weaponry has been upgraded ways ahead of what we had thirty years ago.” Isani added.

“You’re right. Anything else that we need to know?” Adrian asked

“Not at the moment Clan Leader, everything else is on schedule.” Lasani responded.

“Good.”

* * *

Sitting cross-legged in his quarters, Adrian entered his mind space. In there he was attempting to train his brain to focus on many things at the same time. Trying to push his abilities to the point where he could use the Watchtower. The interface itself wasn’t necessary for any other fleet. But Adrian’s fleet was constructed with a completely different approach to battles. Each of the ships was specialized, each had its own strength and weakness.

The Tiamat and the Titan were the largest ships, each was 2900 meters long, between 800 and 1200 meters wide and between 300 and 600 high. The largest ships that the Empire had ever produced. Both had ri-steel hulls and field defenses. The ships were massive with the purpose of drawing the enemy fire to them, shielding the rest of the fleet. Their offensive capabilities were traded in for increased defensive capabilities. Their rail guns were capable of screening the entire area in front of the fleet, their point defense lasers and anti-missile measures the best that the Empire had.

Tiamat had flowing organic line, its front narrow and short, and its back was wide and tall. A few of the designers joked about how it looked like a dragon’s head, and sometimes when Adrian looked at it for a while he could see it. Titan like its commander appeared as if it had a carapace. The hull was shaped as if it had a series of overlapping shells, although it was an illusion only.

Specter was the smallest of the ships, at 1000 meters long. Its hull was made of highly light absorbing ceramics, coated with materials that prevented most scans. The Specter was a stealth ship, its offensive capabilities geared towards striking from the shadows with a single devastating attack, as well as moving around the battlefield unnoticed placing traps.

Its greatest weapon however was the mean by which it moved without being detected. The Specter had gravity drives, based on the drives of the small shuttle that was brought from Sol. The shuttle was built by the League on Earth during the Great War, it was most likely

a prototype as no other was ever found. It wasn't even finished, the obvious room for weapons were left empty as the people working on it died in the war. It was left forgotten until the resistance found it.

The gravity drives worked on the principle of creating a gravitational field that exerted itself on the already present gravity in a system. From planets, suns, and moons, it moved by amplifying and reducing the gravitational influence on the ship. And it was undetectable by any of the conventional sensors. The reasons why no other ship had these drives were many, but the most important one was power requirements. It took a lot of power to run the drives, and the bigger the ship the more power it needed. Which was also one of the reasons for Specter's smaller size. For now it wasn't viable for their larger vessels.

Lighthouse was probably the most unique of the ships as it had very little offensive capability. Instead, the 2000 meter long ship was a 'sensor ship'. The ship had twelve of the most advanced sensory drones that the Empire was capable of producing, with three Ai's working in concert to interpret and gather all the information.

Valhalla was a pure offensive ship, 2200 meters long with the focus on beam weapons. It had no kinetic weapons, and only a half of the missile load that the other ships had. But its particle beam cannons were the most powerful that they could produce.

Twilight and Retribution were more like conventional ships, each 2000 meters long, with equal loads of all of the Empire's weapons. Kinetic, laser, particle and missile.

Invictus and Ras'tar were each 2300 meters long, and their weapons were more geared towards missiles, with a myriad of missile types geared for different situations. But they too had other conventional weapons.

The last was Harbinger, Adrian's ship. Its weapons too were balanced, with a single rail gun that ran half the length of the ship, capable of cracking a small moon. 2800 meters of pure destructive power. It had a secondary energy and data transfer grid throughout the ship. Besides the usual cables and electrical conductors, the Harbinger had a radically new biotechnology. The secondary grid had been 'grown' into the ship. Biological, genetically engineered superconductors that passed information at the speed of light, and were also capable of transferring energy while also keeping their temperature low. With that system the Harbinger was highly resistant to any kind of an EMP attack. Harbinger had a strange design, when observed from above it had an arrowhead shape. In its middle, or the core of the ship that spread from the end to the front tip was needle shaped and made out of pure ri-steel. The two of the arrow head's "wings" were combined ri-steel and most advanced ceramic based

material they possessed.

The original plan was for the fleet to be supported by one hundred special drones, but as they had no time for them to be built that role will be filled by Empire's battleships which were of an older generation. But as even those ships were ahead of Sowir technologically it didn't matter, unless the Sowir had an enormous advantage in numbers. Warpath's fleet will extremely powerful, and with Watchtower it could be far more so. It would have raised their effectiveness, allowed them to fight with their fleet in synchronized way that would have maximized their offensive and defensive capabilities.

So, Adrian trained, he wasn't the one to give up. Splitting his focus was something that he had learned over the course of years. Now he needed to evolve that ability even further. Time was running out, and if he wanted to minimize the deaths of his people he would need the Watchtower interface. The Sowir will strike soon.

Chapter Seventeen

Sanctuary

Seo-yun walked out of the lift as soon as the doors slid open, and stepped onto the Research and Development bottom floor in Olympus City. She walked down the hallway, passing other people without really noticing them as she was focusing on the data shown on her implant's HUD. She had long ago learned the skill of focusing on reading things on her HUD while walking, most people in the Empire did – implants had become essential to living.

Finally a part of Seo-yun that wasn't focusing on reading realized that she had reached her destination, and removed the report she was reading from her HUD. She stepped into the main research lab, and walked around tables filled with equipment to reach her destination at the end of the first area. She reached a locked door and placed her hand on the display close to it.

The computer read her fingerprints and the first door opened, she then passed to the long hallway at the end of which was another security check point. Seo-yun placed her face in front of another display and a scanning light passed over her face. After a moment the display flashed green and she was asked to give a password, which she sent via her imp. Then the doors finally slid open.

Seo-yun entered into a well lit room that had a simple desk a wall-display on the left wall, and a pedestal in the middle of the room on which was placed a smooth silver sphere. The room was occupied, but not by anyone living, in a traditional sense of the word. In the middle of the room floated a figure that vaguely resembled a human, it was a holographic representation of Axull Darr – the forefather of human and Nel race.

The figure had no hair and was very pale blue in color. Its facial features resembled those of humans or Nel, it had the same shaped nose, albeit a bit smaller, as well as the lips and similarly shaped eyes which were all white. It was dressed in a loose gray blue robe and floated above the sphere with its legs crossed. The hologram itself could move and even simulate talking and emotion, it even seemed to generate sound from its mouth, although Seo-yun was sure that it was the sphere that projected the sound from there.

The hologram was a representation of the 'shadow of Axull Darr', a digital copy of the Axull Darr's consciousness. It was not an Ai, not like what the Empire had. By their understanding it was at least a very complex software, it was a computer that based all its decisions on what the real Axull Darr would have done. An Ai was in its nature more logic oriented even though they had a choice and could choose

to ignore logical thinking, sphere's computer could not. At least that was what the Empire's experts thought, they couldn't be sure until they get technology to actually access the sphere.

As Seo-yun approached the desk another hologram appeared, this one was of a short four armed alien, with a triangular head that ended in horn like ridges at the top its head.

"Greetings Seo-yun." The alien hologram said.

"Hello Asumy." Seo-yun said. Asumy was an alien Ai that Olympus discovered long ago on Earth. He was abandoned and operational for thousands of years before humans found him. Now he was in charge of monitoring the sphere and the computer that occupied it. "Anything new?" Seo-yun asked.

"No, everything is the same as the last time you visited." Asumy said.

"Good." Seo-yun said as she sat down at the desk, the two holograms watching her. She turned towards the hologram floating in the center of the room. "Hello Axull Darr."

"Minister Hyeon." The hologram acknowledged.

"I have brought you something." Seo-yun said, and then used her implant to project a series of diagnostics out in the air in front of the sphere using the table's holo. "These are the brain scans of one of the Empire's citizens. The one on the right is a scan from five months ago, the one on the left from just a few days ago. Our experts are unable to figure out what these unusual brain waves are, and I was hoping that you might help." Seo-yun said, Warpath had sent the brain wave scans of Clan Leader Farkas to the Sanctuary medical institute, and they sent them to her when they too were stumped. They hoped that Axull Darr might help, he did in the past with things that they couldn't figure out but had the means to. He usually only withheld knowledge when it involved technologies the Empire didn't know yet.

Seo-yun watched as the hologram pretended to study the scans, she knew that the sphere had already taken the information from the holo-table. Then after its protocols finished it spoke. "Well, this is unexpected."

"Do you know what the problem is?" Seo-yun asked.

Axull Darr remained silent. Seo-yun waited for a few seconds, then realized that the answer was not coming. That could only mean that the answer involved something that the Empire wasn't aware of.

"You won't answer? A man's life is at stake!" Seo-yun said angrily.

The hologram stared right at Seo-yun for what seemed like an hour, and then it finally spoke.

"My protocols prevent me from saying anything. My programing is clear, technologies and knowledge I possess can only be given in the

event that you hear and answer the beacon. Neither you nor the Nel have done so. I have bent my programing as far as I am able in order to broaden the knowledge of things you already know. I cannot tell you what this is. Except to assure you that the life of the person in question is not in peril."

Seo-yun stared at the hologram. It had never before elaborated on its programing to this extent, her people had guessed and assumed a lot, but now they have confirmation. But that also meant that whatever was happening to Adrian was significant, and that the sphere possessed the knowledge of it.

"Thank you Axull Darr. That alleviates some of our concerns." Seo-yun said, while planning on assigning her best people to figure out what is happening to Clan Leader Farkas.

* * *

Later that night Seo-yun was sitting in her and Tomas's library reading a paper book, which were a rarity nowadays. Tomas was sitting on the reading chair across from her reading his own book. Seo-yun tried to focus on reading, but other thoughts intruded on her mind.

She put the book down on her knees. "Tomas."

"Yes?" Tomas said, still reading.

"Where do you see us in ten years?" She asked.

That got his attention and he lowered the book. "Ah… What?" He asked startled.

Seo-yun grinned at his expression. "I don't mean about us."

"Oh."

"I mean the Empire as a whole. Where do you see us in ten years, a hundred, a thousand?" She asked.

Tomas got a thoughtful expression. "What do you mean?"

"What are we going to be? Eventually we will expand and reach areas of space where there are many races. According to the Union databases there are many of them out there. We were lucky in a way to be in an area of space that was sparsely populated. But if we keep this rate of expansion we will eventually meet other empires, other unions. We will see injustice like what happened at Trivax. Here we could involve ourselves, do as we please because we are probably the biggest power in the area. But what are we going to do once we find communities, alliances, races at war?"

"We will keep to our values. But I understand where you are coming from. And yes I do have a rough plan. I want us to become what Axull Darr and his people once were, what he wanted us to be.

Protectors and guides of the galaxy. It will be a long road, and I am sure that we will stumble and make mistakes. But that is my ultimate goal." Tomas said.

Seo-yun studied him quietly for a while before responding. "Ambitious." She said nodding her head. "I guess that my diagnosis was correct."

"Diagnosis?" Tomas asked confused.

"Back on Earth, when we first met. I believe that I diagnosed you as a megalomaniac." Seo-yun said, with the corner of lip turning upwards.

Tomas let out a laugh. "That you did! But I am your megalomaniac."

"Yes, you are." Seo-yun said softly.

* * *

Clan Dai Ven

Clan Leader Jusan of Clan Dai Ven shook his head in disgusts after the video message addressed to him ended. The message was from his contact on Nelus. They had given the message to the ruling council. And the council had chosen to ignore the warning, not believing the proof of Sowir numbers. Their arrogance fooled them into believing that their fleet and system defenses will be enough to fight off any kind of an invasion force, if such force was even real.

Jusan couldn't believe how arrogant and stupid his people were, but he knew what the ruling houses were like. They cared only for their profits, and the people had no choice but to believe their lies. They didn't even realize that their actions were dooming them. Sometimes he wondered if he would have become like them, if he had stayed on Nelus. Probably not, he unlike the others, cared about his people.

Jusan knew that when the Sowir Dominion arrive Nelus' fleets will be ill prepared, and ignorant of the threat. The defenses of Nelus system were significant, and not even the Sowir could take the system quickly and easily, it will be months if not years until they break through all defenses. But innocent people will still be dying until the Empire is able to send help.

Jusan started another video recording to send to his contact. This one with instructions and names of the people in Nelus fleet. His people will be forewarned of the threat, whether the council wanted that or not.

Chapter Eighteen

May; Year 31 – Trivax orbit

Johanna made her way towards the Monarch's CC, she had just received word that reinforcements had arrived, along with her new orders concerning the Furvor. She entered the CC and sat in her command chair. The holo in front of her already showed the data of the new ships in the system. The taskforce consisted out of eight battleships of a newer generation and two dreadnoughts. These battleships were 700 meters long, compared to the 300 meter long old battleships from her fleet. Following them were also a few more supply ships with the help for the Trivaxians.

The two dreadnoughts were Mark Two's, a 1400 meters long ships, and the backbone of the Empire's fleet. The dreadnought were in appearance the same as their predecessors only bigger, with more powerful weapons. But what surprised her was that alongside them was also one of the new ships, a Kraken class dreadnought. The smooth shark like shape of the new ship made it somehow more impressive than the bigger dreadnoughts that were beside it.

"Send a welcoming message to the taskforce, Adjunct." Johanna told the Sensor Handler. "And tell their commanding officer that I will be expecting him on the Monarch as soon as he is able."

"Right away Fleet Commander."

Johanna nodded, then passed the command to Andros and left the CC. A few hours later she was sitting in her ready room when Force Leader Irani arrived. He entered saluted and Johanna guided him to the couch, taking a seat across from him.

"I'm glad your task force finally arrived Force Leader. There had been a lot of work on the ground, repairing the damage that the Furvor did, and I can use more people." Johanna said.

"Fleets Master decided to hold the reinforcements back after you handled the situation until one of the new Kraken class ships was ready."

"Yes, I noticed the ship. Is there any reason as to why she sent it here? I was under the impression that all of the Kraken class ships would be going with the offensive fleets." Johanna asked.

Irani smiled, "All except this one will. I have been charged with bringing the ship here, to you. Congratulations Fleet Commander, the new Kraken class dreadnought Korvus is you new flagship."

"Mine?" Johanna asked stunned.

"Yes, the Monarch's commanding officer as well as a few other upper tier officers will make the transfer with you. The ship is now officially added to your Exploration Fleet. But it does come with new

orders. You are to take your fleet to the Furvor colony systems, destroy all of their presence in space – preferably with them surrendering and transferring onto the planets of their own will, and keep them contained on the planet. Destroy all their means for shipbuilding on the planets as well. Then you are to do the same to their home planet. The ships that will enforce the blockade will be coming within few days."

Johann nodded, she already knew what the Emperor decided for the Furvor, she just thought that it would be someone else who enacts it. "You have my orders?"

Irani nodded, and sent her the orders directly to her imp. Johann read through them and saw that she was supposed to leave within three days. Irani's task force would provide aid and protection to Trivax from here on out.

"Thank you Force Leader. That will be all." She said dismissing him. She had a fleet to prepare.

* * *

Jun; Hyperspace

Johanna walked through her new ship, the dreadnought Korvus. Even after more than a month, the ship still felt strange to her. It was so different than the Monarch, which always seemed cold. Korvus was somehow refined, warm. You could feel the ship's power in its walls, in the soft humming of its drives. She was falling in love with it.

And she couldn't help but be giddy about taking it into combat soon. Even though the twinge of unease still threatened to grow. The battle against the Furvor ships had gone a long way to making her come to terms with what happened on Earth. She had defended a world, saved billions. It didn't make up for the deaths on Earth, but it helped.

Now her fleet was in hyperspace as they didn't know any trans-lanes to the Furvor colony, and were forced to travel via hyperspace. The travel time was one month out of which only two days remained. Soon her ships will enter the Furvor system, broadcast the records of the battle and the Empire's demands. If the Furvor surrender, they will be transported to the planet and left there, any shipbuilding facilities on the ground will be destroyed from orbit, and two of her ships will be watching over the world to make sure they don't try and leave.

Later they will be replaced with the ships that will be arriving from the Empire, while Johanna and her fleet continued towards their home system. The colony system had relatively little presence in space, two space stations and a mining operation on one of the moons.

But they did have a defense task force of thirty ships. Which was nothing that her fleet couldn't handle.

The home system on the other hand was more difficult, they had fifteen stations, seven shipyards, and a force of one hundred and fifty ships. They didn't colonize any of the other planets in their system, their belief was that they can only have homes on worlds that can support their kind of life. Which was also why they attacked Trivax.

But in the end no number of ships will save them, the Furvor were technologically far behind the Emprie. They will have no hope but to surrender. The Empire's plan was to keep them isolated on their two worlds, until such a time as when they become worthy of being allowed back into space. The Empire will provide them the means to redeem themselves. Them changing their ways won't immediately absolve them of their sins, but it will be a start.

* * *

Two days later – Furvor colony

Johanna's fleet came out of hyperspace in a flash of blue light, her ships sensors going active immediately painting the picture of the system on her holo. She ordered her fleet forward, towards the Furvor colony, sending out the records and their demands in front. It took an hour for the transmissions to reach the Furvor, and immediately with her fleet's FTL scans she saw the change. Their ships moved to intercept hers. They were going to fight. That was fine by Johanna, she would crush their fleet then destroy their stations.

* * *

Using her c-board Johanna commanded her fleet. She split her fleet and using her ships superior speed she surrounded the far slower Furvor ships. Then she ordered her ships to fire their kinetic weapons, catching the slow Furvor ships in a cross fire. The Furvor were firing missiles but most got destroyed by the hail heading their way, and anything that passed was easily taken by the point defenses.

The metal shells started impacting the Furvor ships, smashing their hulls and destroying their ships. In a single attack the Furvor fleet was gone.

* * *

Three days later her fleet was parked in the planets high orbit. The Furvor resistance was futile, their ships, mining facilities, and stations were destroyed. After their fleet was destroyed the people they had on the mining facilities and the stations surrendered, and Johanna transported them to the planet, and then destroyed their mining facilities and stations in orbit. Then her ships bombed every shipbuilding facility on the ground. The Furvor colonists were now stuck on the planet. She left two of her frigates in the orbit to wait for the Empire's reinforcements, and pointed her fleet towards the hyperspace barrier. Next stop was Furvor's home system.

* * *

Jun; Furvor home system

Just like in their colony system, the Furvor home system refused to surrender at. Sending their fleet of ships against Johanna's fleet. A part of Johanna was sad, because she knew that crew of those ships would die in order for their leaders to get a point.

The Furvor fleet sped towards Johanna's fleet at laughable speeds. Johanna waited until she knew that their ships were in range to fire on her ships, her ships had been in the firing range of their own weapons for a while.

"Engage the field defenses." Andros said. The Korvus was at the head of the formation and the Furvor ships opened fire with their lasers on it first. Their fire hit the Korvus, and had no effect. Warpath's defensive technology proved to be far ahead of anything that Furvor could throw at them. Johanna ordered for her ships to open fire at the Furvor biggest ships with their particle and laser weapons. The Empire's weapons blew through enemy ships, destroying them in a single hit. Johanna let her fleet stand down and wait, hoping that the surviving Furvor ships will take up the surrender offer that her ships were transmitting constantly.

After a few minutes of no response from the enemy, Johanna was about to order her fleet continue their attack, when they received a communication from the remaining fleet.

The Furvor surrendered. Johanna ordered their ships to move towards the stations in their orbit. Then her soldiers took control of the station and organized the prisoner transport to the planet. The Furvor had a big population on their home world, around nine billion. And Johanna had no hope of keeping them prisoners with the small numbers she had unless she did the same thing that the Ra'a'zani did to Earth. Cut down their numbers to a more manageable size. But the Empire was not like the Ra'a'zani. The Furvor would be left to their

own devices but wouldn't be allowed to leave their worlds as punishment for what they had done in Trivax system.

In time they might be allowed back into space, but they will need to show that they had changed their ways.

Johanna sighed, with this last battle her job was done. The Empire would send warships and the army to take control and manage the situation. Her ships will return to exploring. In a way it was a relief that she would no longer need to engage in battles. But on the other hand, she already felt like she would miss it. She had always been a military woman, at least until the Ra'a'zani. But now she felt like she could get back to the commanding a war fleet. The nightmares that had plagued her had subsided, and her tremors and fear disappeared as she went from battle to battle. Perhaps she might send a request to change posts. But not yet, she had grown fond of exploring, even though her heart was in battle.

* * *

July; Sanctuary

"The situation with the Furvor is contained. The ships we dispatched from the Empire had arrived and taken control of the systems. The Exploration Fleet is continuing their exploration of the neighboring systems." Laura said.

"What are we going to do with them?" Seo-yun asked.

Tomas sighed and looked around the small private meeting room. He was sitting there with Laura and Seo-yun. "We will keep them isolated to their planets until we can find a way to… rehabilitate them. They can't be allowed to run around going from star system to star system and attacking other races."

"I can agree with that in principle, but in practice… How are we going to rehabilitate them?" Seo-yun asked.

"I don't know yet, but we will have time to figure it out. Our people have opened communication with their leaders, we need to learn about them, and teach them about us."

"You do realize that we will need to do something similar to the Sowir?" Laura asked.

Tomas grimaced, "Yes. The thought had crossed my mind. But their crime is much greater. Sowir had wiped out three races, and almost wiped out a fourth. They are schemers and backstabbers, their crimes cannot be forgiven easily. But we know so little about the real Sowir… We can't possibly contain the agents at every single world they own, nor can we move them to other worlds. But it wouldn't even matter, without guidance from the real Sowir, the agents just

revert to animals. Animals that can't function, they'll just die on their own."

"Can we alter them enough to let them survive?" Laura asked.

"No, we have been looking into it, but what the Sowir had done is permanent. They are probably as advanced in genetics and biological manipulation as we are. The change was designed in a way that prohibited any further alterations." Seo-yun answered.

"It doesn't matter, our goal is to take away their industry, force the true Sowir to show themselves, and then we will see what to do about them." Tomas said.

"Are we considering wiping them all out?" Laura asked hesitantly.

"Only as a last resort." Tomas responded.

"But we already know that they are not trustworthy. The only two options we have are to either kill them all or do the same thing we did to the Furvor." Seo-yun said.

"Yes. Our main objective is for us to imprison them on a world all by themselves. " Tomas said.

"I understand why we are doing this, but should we, who are we to imprison other intelligent races?" Seo-yun asked.

"We have the power to stop them now before they grow too big to be contained. With that power comes responsibility. Yes, we can turn our backs. We can let Sowir take Nelus and let them keep expanding threatening every race they come in contact with. But do you really want that? We are not perfect, I know that, but as long as I rule, we will protect those who need protection." Tomas said.

"Alright Tomas, I will not bring this up again, I promise." Seo-yun said.

Tomas started to respond, when his implant pinged with an incoming message. He focused and brought it up to his HUD. After reading it, he looked to Seo-yun and Laura, noticing by their expressions that they too had received the same message.

Laura was the first to speak. "The time just ran out. Two thousand warships and two hundred support ships has just left the Sowir staging system." The Empire was now on a warpath.

* * *

Clan Dai Ven

Jusan watched the latest response from his contacts on Nelus. His subterfuge has worked, the fleet would be ready for the Sowir. He knew that their fleet wasn't enough to fight off the Sowir but at least they will not be caught completely unaware. His messages also told

them that the Empire would send help once the Sowir arrive, that they only need to stall the attacking fleet and then work in concert with the Empire's ships to destroy the Sowir. Hopefully the Council will let the people in the fleet lead the battle, and not meddle with them.

* * *

August; Sanctuary system

Fleet Commander Bethany Jones-Wright of the Second Fleet stood in the Command Center of her flagship the Audacious. She gazed at the holo in front of her, her fleet was moving slowly towards the trans-station that led to Waypoint system. Two hundred Mark Two dreadnoughts and another one hundred of the Kraken class, supported by seventy auxiliaries – forty ammo factory ships, ten medical ships, ten army transports, and ten repair ships.

She knew that Adrian's Warpath fleet would start its trip to Nelus in a month, the trip from Warpath to Nelus was much shorter than what her fleet would need to go through. She also knew that Adrian had some kind of new ships, but not much about them.

For a moment she debated contacting him, but so much time had passed between their last talk that she was afraid that she wouldn't have anything to say. She would be lying to herself if she didn't admit that there were times during the last thirty years when she regretted not waiting for Adrian. She and Harry had a good marriage, for the first few years. And then after the reality of her life calling hit her husband, they started to fight, constantly. Eventually he found someone else to keep him company during the time she was away.

When she found out about it, she was surprised that when it didn't hit her as hard as she thought it would be. She cared for Harry, but she knew now that she had made a mistake. But even with that knowledge she had refused to get a divorce. Instead she insisted that they try to mend things. And they did in a fashion, although things were never again the same.

She knew why she stayed and insisted on them fixing things. It was because of her Pride. All her friends had told her that she was making a mistake, and yet she ignored them all. And now she didn't want to admit to all those who had warned her that she was wrong.

Shaking her head she dismissed those thoughts and turned to her holo. There she saw her fleet of three hundred and seventy ships on its way deep into the Sowir territory. Her fleet was about to use the trans-station, and soon her ships will start the transfer. Bethany watched as her ships stopped in the Sanctuary-Waypoint trans-station, and she opened the comm to her fleet.

“This is Fleet Commander Jones-Wright to the Second Fleet, prepare for transfer.”

* * *

Fleet Commander Nair Hakeem of the Third Fleet watched as Second Fleet entered the trans-lane vortex in a violet wave of light. It will take them several hours to go through the trans-lane, several hours during which no ship could enter that lane. That was why his ships will be using the trans-lane to Nuva. Their travel time will be two days, and then they will need to take several more lanes to get to Sowir territory. The two fleets would be going to different areas of their territory, the Third Fleet will strike at their border systems, while the Second Fleet attacks the systems deeper in the Sowir controlled space.

The two fleets will still have to use hyperspace travel to their targets, the Empire hadn’t explored all the trans-lanes in the Sowir territory. But it would still be much faster than the Sowir fleet, the two fleets will be in position before the Sowir arrive at Nelus. But since Sowir now had FTL communications they needed to wait until Warpath’s fleet attacks that fleet in order to prevent it turning around to defend their space. Their attack won’t start until the Sowir fleet commits to sieging Nelus. Nair commed his fleet, and announced their transfer.

* * *

October; Year 31 – Warpath

The ten massive ships moved slowly out from the massive opening of the asteroid. Each of the ships completely different than the other, their hulls painted in different colors. But all shared one thing, the emblem of their fleet, the Vanguard Fleet as it was dubbed by Clan Leader Adrian Farkas. A red shield with two swords crossed on it.

The ships moved in formation with two ships that were larger than the others in the lead, followed by the others arranged in two rows of four. The small force increased its speed as they exited the asteroid and set a course towards the trans-station to Waypoint. About thirteen hours later, the fleet arrived in Waypoint system and was greeted by a fleet of three hundred and fifty sovereign class battleships. At 800 meters long the two hundred battleships were a force to be reckoned with, but they were an old class, their hulls built

only with metals that the humanity had used before the forming of the Empire. They were still powerful, the level of their technology on par with Sowir Dominion, but the ten ships that moved to join them were far more advanced.

The two forces met and joined in a fleet. In concert they moved towards one of the Waypoints less used trans-stations that would take them in the direction of the Nelus system. The travel time was about a week, but the fleet would sit in wait for the Sowir fleet to arrive and begin its assault on the system. Then when they were committed, the Warpath Fleet would enter the last trans-lane and catch them from behind, while the Nelus fleet attacks from the front. Together the two smaller fleets would be able to take on the Sowir fleet.

Chapter Nineteen

December; Year 31

Adrian sat and waited for the Sowir forces to arrive at Nelus. The timing was tricky, his fleet needed to arrive early enough to prevent as many Nel casualties as they could, but also late enough for the Sowir fleet to be already engaged with the defenders. Which was why his fleet was waiting for their monitoring drone to report on Sowir's arrival. It will take the invading fleet about five hours to reach the first of Nelus installations in the orbit of the system's gas giant, and it would take Adrian's fleet five and a half hours to arrive by trans-lane.

Giving Sowir an hour and a half to attack the installations. Nelus had about forty ships stationed there as a defense, in spite of Adrian's suggestion that they move them and evacuate the installations. The Nelus council was still playing games, they refused to believe in anything that the Empire told them. Deluding themselves in some kind of superiority. They believed that they could take the Sowir fleet, if one existed, by themselves. Adrian just hoped that the council doesn't do anything stupid once they realize the magnitude of the threat.

* * *

Nelus

The relative peace and calm of Nelus system was shattered as the Nelus defending fleet's light speed sensors detected a fleet of invading ships exiting hyperspace at the barrier of the system. Immediately after their arrival two thousand and two hundred ships started moving towards their closest target, a fueling station in the orbit of the system's gas giant.

Short time before that, unnoticed by anyone a small monitoring that was positioned close to the most likely arrival point of the invading fleet, detected the invaders and sent out an FTL feed of their arrival to another system. The hyperspace communication was undetected by the invaders whose own sensors were blinded by the massive hyperspace transfer of their fleet.

* * *

Upon receiving the feed from the drone, Adrian immediately passed the information back to Sanctuary and then ordered his fleet to

open a vortex to the trans-lane. A few seconds later his ships were washed in a violet wave of light and disappeared. It will be five and a half hours until they reappear again.

* * *

Bethany read the orders coming in from Sanctuary. She ordered her ships to enter the trans-lane, on their way towards one of Sowir key systems. Her ships would travel for a week, but would travel some twenty light years. The system had only a few ships defending it as it was deep in the Sowir territory. But it had a significant industrial capability, which her ships would take for the Empire. Any installation that they could land troops on will be taken, any other will be destroyed.

The Second Fleet opened a vortex to trans-space and entered.

* * *

Nair Hakeem got the same order from Sanctuary that the Second Fleet did. His Third Fleet was in one of the Empire's border systems, waiting to enter the trans-lane to the closest Sowir system. His ships would be the first to strike at the Sowir held system in this new war, as the travel time through the lane was just two days. The system that was his target had a moderate military presence, sixty Sowir ships were always stationed there, with dozens moving through the system on and from their patrols of the border.

Nair sent out the order to his ships, and they entered the trans-lane.

* * *

Nelus – five and a half hours later – warship Harbinger

The Warpath Fleet entered Nelus system between the hyperspace barrier and the system's gas giant, at the Nelus only incoming trans-station. Immediately their sensors went active, bathing the system in a tachyon burst. The fleets FTL sensors came back painting the exact picture of the system on Clan Leader Adrian Farkas' small holo on his command board.

The Sowir Fleet was moving further into the system, towards the fifth planet of the system its three moons and twenty four stations orbiting them and the planet. There was nothing in the orbit of the

sixth planet – the gas giant, only debris from destroyed ships and installations. That angered Adrian, he had warned the council to abandon those installations and move his ships back to the fifth planet which was much more defensible.

The council had stationed a fleet of four hundred ships at the fifth planet. Again they had refused to listen, and had kept the rest of their ships in orbit of Nelus. The Sowir had started preparing their ship formations for the siege of the planets defenses. Adrian could see it in their movements, a glance at the information provided by Clan Leader Jusan told him that the Sowir ships were just outside the effective range of the station's weapons. The Sowir had put eight hundred ships forward while the rest were adjusting their course to move around the planet and proceed deeper towards the next planet.

That would have played well for Adrian's fleet, if he had arrived a bit later. He knew that the Sowir would turn those ships around once they detect his ships. He checked the ranges and calculated that if his fleet starts moving at full speed immediately they would catch the eight hundred Sowir ships before the rest could return. It would take the Sowir awhile to detect his ships, as their sensors were still only light speed.

Assuming their fleet turns back the moment they detect his ships, he would have nineteen minutes until they get back and in range of Adrian's ships who will by then be engaged with the force they left behind. In nineteen minutes his ships could do some real damage to the Sowir, if the Nelus ships push forward as well. Once the rest of the Sowir fleet returns, he might need to disengage regroup and then see what can be done.

Deciding on a course of action, Adrian recorded and sent a message to the defenders instructing them to have their ships push forward at the Sowir once his arrive. He also sent a message for Sowir to surrender as the Emperor ordered, but both of them knew that it was unlikely they would accept. Then, with a couple swipes of his hand and implant commands he sent out orders to his fleet's commanders and watched as his ships started moving forward. The speed of his ships was much faster than that of the Sowir, but still the ten Warpath ships were moving at speeds that were less than what they were capable of as they had to keep at the pace of the battleships.

Adrian swiped his hand to his left, and a list of names appeared there. With his implant he found the Commander of the Specter and opened a channel. In front of him a window appeared with the video from the Command Center of the Specter and its Commander sitting in her chair.

"Warmaster?" Commander of the Specter Mariana Tully asked,

using Adrian's title when in command of a fleet. He was no longer a part of the Empire's regular fleet so his old rank of Fleet Commander no longer applied.

"Commander Tully, it looks like you will have the honor of being the first of the Vanguard fleet to test the full extent of your abilities in battle. It is time for you to weave your web Commander. I'm sending you your orders." Adrian said. He saw the Commander read through his orders and then grin.

"Understood Warmaster." She responded. Adrian nodded and closed the link.

He looked at the holo in front of him and watched as the Specter dipped below the fleet, and then as it's heat signature slowly started fading. The Specter was equipped with best heat sinks that the Empire could produce, which would allow it to move cold for about a day before they would need to expel the heat out of the ship. Plenty of time to fulfil Adrian's orders. He checked the movements of the Sowir main fleet once more. They were still moving away, but the light from Adrian's fleet hadn't reached them yet. But it will reach the force Adrian was moving towards soon.

Adrian started issuing orders to the battleships and the Vanguard fleet. He instructed Lighthouse to send out its drones out and spread half of them around the force in front of them and to send the other half towards the main force. He moved Tiamat and Titan in front with the battleships, splitting the force into two wall shaped formations of one hundred and fifty ships each, remaining fifty battleships he pulled back to his ship Naming the formation task force zero.

Then he sent the orders for Valhalla and Twilight to move into the Tiamat's formation, and Retribution and Ras'tar to move into the Titan's, renaming the two formations into task force one and task force two. He kept Lighthouse and Invictus with his ship and the battleships in the formation between the two walls.

As his force drew closer to the enemy, he started to notice a change in their formation, they had finally seen his ships. Which meant that the defenders should have gotten his message. There was no response from the Sowir and their movements suggested that there wasn't going to be one. Another couple of minutes later and Adrian noticed the Nelus fleet moving forward, abandoning the defenses of their stations and moving to engage the Sowir. He also noticed that the Nelus ships moved at speed that will let his ships reach the Sowir first. That was fine, their ship were less powerful than Sowir ships.

Then his ships entered into firing range. Firing missiles at the Sowir ships wouldn't be as effective as it would have been against a smaller force, their ships were positioned close together and there was enough of them to provide protection for each other. But Adrian still

sent out orders for task forces one and two to do so. His missiles might not even reach their ships, but it wouldn't matter, the Sowir had no way of defending against his ships other weapons.

* * *

Three hundred of the Empire's battleships came to a stop and launched their missiles, in a span of five minutes each task force fired 7500 missiles. 15000 missiles sped towards the Sowir. The last time that Sowir ships encountered the Empire's missiles didn't go well for them. But this time they were ready. Upon detecting the Empire's ships the Sowir assumed a formation specifically designed to fight this kind of threat. Each ship's on-board point defense computer linked with each of the other ships, creating a net, their point defense lasers now working in perfect harmony. As soon as the Empire's missiles entered the range of their defenses they opened fire.

Six hundred ships were positioned to take the Empire's fire, each of those ships equipped with dozens of point defense lasers. Lasers reached out to strike at the missiles with pinpoint precision, every laser fired at the same time at the missiles that were approximately the same distance from them. The tactic was devised to take down as many of the enemy missiles as possible before their computers realized that they were under fire and executed their evasion protocols. But the Empire's missiles were not the same as they were thirty years ago. For every 500 missiles, one was actually equipped with FTL sensors and connected with the others. The 30 sensor missiles detected the danger the moment the Sowir ships fired, but still the near instant response wasn't fast enough.

About half of the point defense lasers missed their target, destroying only 6000 missiles in a span of seconds. The Sowir defense net now changed protocols to match the Empire's now evading missiles. The Sowir had studied the records of their battles with the Empire's ships, their new defensive system designed specifically to battle them. The Empire's missiles were more advanced, faster and more maneuverable than before, but the Sowir defenses were more advanced as well, and the number of their ships coupled with their positioning meant that Sowir had an upper hand. Over the next minute their defenses destroyed all of the Empire's missiles.

* * *

Harbinger

Adrian watched as his fleets missiles were destroyed by the Sowir.

"They've upgraded their defenses." Iris commented.

"Yes, we knew that it was likely they would do so. We haven't observed their ships in battle since our last encounter." Adrian said. But he was impressed, his ships were capable of firing much larger load, and his battleships had fired only about 10% of their supplies, and only their standard missiles – the Striker MK 7 missiles. His ships were equipped with other types of missiles, but this first attack was a test in a way, he wanted to see how effective the Sowir defenses are. He was sure that his fleet could fire enough missiles to overwhelm the defenses, but then he would be dangerously low when the main Sowir force returns. The battleships ammo supply was just too small for this kind of engagements.

His fleet now stood at a relative stop, across from the Sowir ships. Battles in space could take many different shapes depending on circumstances. Now the Sowir force was blocked between Nelus and his forces, if they tried to move and escape they would only make things worse by turning their backs to his and Nelus ships. They were forced to stay put and wait for their main force. So the three forces would stand at a distance and fire at each other.

Adrian noticed that four hundred Nelus ships had moved out of the protective area of their stations and engaged the two hundred Sowir ships positioned at the back of their formation. Nelus ships were technically on the same technological level as Sowir, or they were thirty years ago at least. But half of the Nelus ships were converted merchant ships, another hundred were their new cruiser class and the last hundred their old heavy cruisers. The Sowir force consisted out of two hundred battleships, three hundred heavy, and hundred light cruisers, presumably all upgraded with all kinds of technologies they got in the last thirty years as proven by their much better defenses. Thirty years ago the human ships managed to defeat Sowir mainly thanks to their kinetic weapons against which Sowir had no defenses. Now Adrian couldn't use those weapons against the force in front of him, any miss could find its way to the Nelus force behind the Sowir, and in the worst case he could accidentally hit the planet or the installations in orbit.

He was forced to use laser and particle weapons. The clock to his right showed another eleven minutes until the main force reached firing range. He started manipulating the command board and issued orders to his ships.

Chapter Twenty

December; Year 31 – Nelus

Three hundred and fifty ships of the Warpath Fleet opened fire with their laser and particle weapons, just a moment before the Sowir fired with their own weapons. The Sowir fire included their own missiles, and every second hundreds of missiles launched and sped towards the Empire's ships, only to be destroyed by their defensive fire.

Powerful lasers struck at the Sowir ships scorching their hulls, forcing the Sowir ships to move or roll their ships in order to dissipate the heat. Each of the Empire's lasers held their fire for five seconds before stopping to cool down, the Sowir lasers doing the same. In the opening minute of fire the six hundred Sowir ships managed to inflict light damage to fifty of the Empire's battleships with their particle and laser weapons, while the Empire's battleships destroyed twenty of their heavy cruisers, fifteen light cruisers and eight battleships. But soon enough the fire from the Sowir ships changed focus as they started targeting less ships, but brining to bear more fire on them.

The Empire started losing ships.

* * *

Harbinger

Adrian watched his holo as reports started coming in from his battleships, they were taking more and more fire, forcing him to move the damaged ships back. The Sowir ships were not as technologically advanced as his battleships, but their weapons were obviously more powerful than 30 years ago. And they were fighting smart, firing with as many of their ships as they were able on a single one of his.

But even with their numerical advantage the exchange favored his fleet. For every one of his ships lost the Sowir lost five. Adrian knew that he could have destroyed more of their ships if he had ordered his Vanguard ships to fire with their full capabilities, but he didn't want to tip his hand and show what those ships can do before the Sowir main force arrives.

He glanced at his holo to see how Nelus side of the battle was going. The exchange there was more even, Sowir lost thirty eight ships and Nelus thirty two. Even though Nelus had numerical advantage.

Adrian turned and checked on the Sowir main force that was now moving at full speed towards his ships, the clock read another six minutes until they get in range. Adrian adjusted his orders.

* * *

The fire between the Empire and Sowir intensified as nine ships from the Empire's side increased their rate of fire. Suddenly the Valhalla opened up with its particle beams and they started hitting the Sowir ships with deadly precision, destroying ships in a single shot. Laser fire several times more powerful than that of the Empire's battleships reached out and burned the Sowir ships without stopping for the cooling periods, melting through the Sowir ships cutting them in half.

Invictus and Ras'tar launched missiles, two hundred each. The most advanced missile that the Empire ever produced sped towards the Sowir at amazing speeds, closing the distance in a short time. The Sowir defensive net attempted to take them down, but the missiles evading protocols were far more advanced and the missiles were equipped with the field defense technology. They couldn't keep the field up for long, only a couple of seconds. But that was enough to get them through the defending laser fire.

Four hundred Enforcer MK 1 missiles smashed into eighty Sowir ships, five missiles per ship. The eighty Sowir ships disappeared in a flash of fire, their debris flying out in every direction, hitting and damaging nearby ships.

* * *

In fifteen minutes Sowir had lost one hundred and forty four ships while he lost nineteen of his battleships. On the Nelus side the Sowir had lost another sixty three ships while Nelus fleet losses raised up to eighty nine, their ships just couldn't stand up to their enemy's. With only four more minutes until the Sowir main force arrives, Adrian pushed one of his formations in front to screen the other as he positioned it to wait for the main force. He raised the formation his ship was in above the two others, allowing it to fire at both Sowir forces while the wall formations in front still provided defensive and covering fire.

Adrian was tempted to fire more of the Vanguard fleet's missiles, but he knew that he would need them when the main force arrives. He checked to see the main force's progress and saw that they had entered the range of his battleships. He sent out orders, keeping in mind the timing, he needed to get this just right.

* * *

Out in the darkness of space a shape moved quickly out of the path of the incoming Sowir force. The Vanguard ship Specter sped towards the point above the Sowir fleet. Specter was the fastest ship in the Vanguard fleet, and by default the fastest ship in the Empire. In record time it arrived its vantage point and then settled in to observe its work.

Behind it the Specter had left a gift for the Sowir fleet. And the Sowir fleet was heading right in the middle of it.

* * *

The Sowir main force of one thousand and two hundred warships followed by two hundred support ships advanced on the Empire's force, unsuspecting of the danger on their path. The greatest mistake that the Sowir made was to take a direct path to the Empire's ships.

The Empire's task force two had adjusted its position to meet the oncoming Sowir force, and as soon as they entered their missile range they fired. One hundred and fifty battleships fired all of their remaining missiles, with the three Vanguard ships in their task force adding fifty of their more advanced missiles each. Twenty two thousand six hundred and fifty missiles rushed at the Sowir main force in two waves of eleven thousand. The Sowir ships immediately linked their point defense computers, their net started taking down the missiles at an alarming rate. But then their force's movement brought them close enough to the area that the Specter had left just a few minutes before.

In seven positions around the Sowir fleet's direct course Specter had laid mines. Although they weren't really mines, more like missiles that floated around in space until the small guiding drone detected enemy ships nearby. The missiles weren't in the Sowir fleet's direct path, but just off it, close enough to be effective, but out of the way of their visual sensors which were probably focused on the Empire's fleet and now on the missiles speeding towards them. The seven drones sent out signals to their respective groups of missiles and their targeting computers turned on, found a target, and fired their drives.

The missiles were close enough that Sowir ships had no hope of reacting in time, especially when their net was preoccupied with the missiles coming from the Empire's ships. Each of the seven groups had 200 missiles, 1400 missiles total. The missiles came at the Sowir force from seven different directions from almost point blank range, targeting closest ships.

But even with the element of surprise and their superior speed, the missiles encountered defensive fire. The Sowir new defense system

proved much more formidable, the defensive fire took down half of the missiles. But the other 700 found their marks destroying ninety four Sowir ships and crippling thirteen. The first wave of the missiles from the task force two was almost destroyed, but the trap sprung by Specter allowed some to make it through destroying another seventeen ships.

Immediately after the first wave passed the Sowir tightened their formation, filling in the holes made by the destroyed ships. And their defensive fire focused on the second wave. Again the missiles started disappearing quickly, but the second wave had 150 of missiles from Vanguard ships. While Sowir net was taking down the regular missiles those 150 reached the inner envelope of the Sowir defenses and with their field defenses they passed through, destroying another seventy three Sowir ships.

* * *

Adrian watched as the Sowir ships took down most of the missiles speeding towards them, but even with their new defense system they couldn't take them all down. Although if there wasn't for Specter's mines they might have been able to so. Their advantage in numbers was negating Adrian's missiles. If their numbers were equal he could have taken at least half of them with the same amount of missiles.

He checked the holo, the Sowir main force had lost one hundred and eighty four ships, but all of them were light and heavy cruisers. Their battleships was in the second line, and behind them followed one hundred and ten much bigger ships, the Sowir new class that was inspired by the Empire's dreadnoughts. He didn't know their capabilities, although scans indicated that their weapons had about 20% more power. He glanced back to the force between his and Nelus ships. Task force zero and one were still pounding the Sowir ships while the Nelus ships did the same from the other side. The force of eight hundred ships was now reduced to five hundred and eighty three ships. Nelus ships had lost more ships than the Sowir force they had engaged and now they had about two hundred and eighty ships left.

With the arrival of the main force, Adrian needed to reposition his fleet. He instructed task force two to be rear guard as his ships slowly moved around the smaller Sowir force to join the Nelus ships. That would allow the two Sowir forces to meet up as well, but there was nothing he could do about that. If his ships remained where they were he would get squashed between two forces larger than his own. His ships were faster than the Sowir so it would be easy for him to

change positions if the Nelus ships screened their movement. He was just about to send a message to the defenders when he was interrupted.

"Adrian look!" Iris exclaimed in his head, and he immediately focused on the holo.

"What the hell are they doing?!" Adrian asked angrily. On the holo he could see that Nelus ships were moving back behind towards their defense stations, and the Sowir were letting them. The Sowir force now no longer tied up was moving on task force two.

Immediately Adrian realized what was going to happen. No matter how advanced his ships were they wouldn't stand a chance against a force that was ten times greater. Frantically Adrian started issuing orders to his ships. Task force zero and one had already moved away from the task force two as it stayed behind to screen his ships movement, it would take time for his ships to turn back and aid task force two. His ships will arrive after the two Sowir forces meet up and attack the task force.

Chapter Twenty One

Vanguard ship Titan

Five hundred and eighty Sowir ships met up with one thousand and sixteen warships of their main force. Together they focused on the one hundred and forty two ships of the task force two. The amount of missiles flying towards the task force increased as thousands of missiles from the main force were added to those of the smaller force. Now the Sowir fleet focused its particle and laser weapons on the Empire's battleships, inflicting significant damage.

Upon receiving orders from Warmaster Farkas, Commander Riss started passing them on to his task force. The Guxcacul used his six limbs to manipulate the Titan's c-board – which was specifically designed for him. Seeing the onslaught headed to the ships under his command Riss moved the Titan in front of the formation, hoping to attract most of the fire if he presented a tempting target, while also unleashing the full extent of his ship's abilities. Now that the enemy was no longer in between his ships and friendlies they were able to use the Empire's most primitive and the most effective weapon. All of the battleships opened fire with their rail guns, just like the Titan used its own rail guns to fill the space in front of his task force with a screen of shells, reducing the massive amount of enemy missiles.

But Riss saw that it wasn't going to be enough. There was simply too many of them, and soon missiles started to pass through, hitting his ships. The Titan shrugged off any hit, both from missiles and other weapons. Its field bathing the ship in a shimmering field, dispersing laser fire, deflecting any particle and missile hits. But his other ships weren't doing so well. The battleships were taking too much damage. But so were the Sowir, the fire from his ships rail guns reached the enemy, inflicting heavy damage as the ships had little room to maneuver in their current formation. Both the Ras'tar and the Retribution moved out of the formation to support the Titan, each firing their own powerful weapons. Ras'tar flooded the space as it started firing its Enforcer missiles, targeting the Sowir battleships.

The exchange rate was in the Empire's favor, but the Sowir had enough ships that it didn't matter. Now that they were holding nothing back, Riss's task force had destroyed more than two hundred ships, but they had already lost sixty seven battleships, leaving him with only seventy five ships. The rest of the Empire's fleet was almost here, but Riss feared that even with another two hundred ships they couldn't win. They needed the Nelus force to keep some of the Sowir force occupied, with their withdrawal the Sowir were free to focus all of their numbers on the Warpath Fleet.

* * *

Harbinger

Adrian made two mistakes. The first one was the moment that he trusted the Nel from Nelus. He knew what they were like, how their arrogance and stupidity guided their every move. And now they had betrayed him. If he had approached this battle without them from the beginning, his tactics would have been different. He would have stayed on the outskirts of the Sowir maximum range poking at them, wearing them down over time. He could have destroyed that fleet on his own, by denying it its greatest advantage, numbers. But he allowed his fleet to get tangled up with the Sowir because he counted on the Nelus fleet to keep at least a part of their fleet occupied.

The second mistake was him holding his ships back, his fleet could have savaged the smaller Sowir force if had allowed his Vanguard ships to fight at full capacity. Instead, he wanted to hold back until the main force arrived. His plan was to move behind into the protective area of the defenders stations, by holding back he wanted the Sowir to think that they could take both his fleet and the defenses. Then when the Nelus defenders could assist with their stations he would have struck back.

Now the Sowir fleet's numbers were coming to bear against him in full force, as their fleet slowly tried to surround his ships.

Adrian could turn and run, abandon task force two. But the Sowir ships would then turn back and return to their space. They wouldn't arrive quickly enough to prevent the Empire's invasion, but if they met up with other fleets in their territory they will become a big threat. Adrian could see the way to win, even now. But it would come at a great cost in life. His battleships had almost run out of shells, their missile supplies were already gone. He will lose a lot of battleships, perhaps even all of them. There was only one way to minimize the loss of life. And Adrian had promised not to use it.

"You know what I need to do Iris?" Adrian asked.

"Yes. I don't like it though." She responded.

Adrian opened a channel to Invictus, now he had to tell Isani.

* * *

Invictus

"You are going to do what?!" Isani yelled at the vid feed, seeing Adrian flinch.

"You must see that it is the only way."

"You can't even use it for more than twenty minutes!"

“It will be enough, when I lose consciousness you will take command of the fleet and finish what I started.”

“Adrian…” Isani said.

“I know, but we have no choice, you see the situation yourself.”

Isani didn’t respond, instead he watched as Adrian gave him a smile and then closed the link. Isani closed his eyes and hoped that his friend gets out of this alive.

* * *

Harbinger

After passing on the command of his ship to his second, Adrian walked into the Watchtower room with Akash and Sora following close behind. He sat in the chair and the two wolions sat in front of it looking at him.

“I’m going to be fine.” He said with a smile, the two just canted their heads in a perfectly synchronized motion. He knew what that meant.

“Yes I know that it is stupid, but I need to do this.” Adrian said, then pressed a button on the chair, he felt the connector at the back of the chair reach to the port on the back of his neck. In the next moment he felt the connection establish and his eyes start to close. The last thing he saw were Akash and Sora watching him.

Again, it seemed as if time has passed when he opened his eyes to look at Iris in her fiery form, but he knew that it was just an instant. The two of them were in space and in front of them were the two battling fleets. Just like last time he knew everything that his ships sensors saw. His two task forces had rejoined task force two and he saw his last orders being implemented, the task force two was pulling behind the newly arrived ships. But he could also see that the Sowir planned to encircle his fleet, spread enough to let all of their ships fire. And he could already feel pain slowly appearing.

“Iris, keep an eye on the Sowir tell me if you see any patterns.” Adrian said. And iris floated over to the Sowir positions and concentrated on them.

Adrian knew that this was all in his head, it was information presented in this way to make it easier for him to handle. He put everything aside and focused on giving orders to his fleet.

While in Watchtower with a thought he could send orders to all of his ships, he could see danger faster than if he was reading the c-board, and that allowed him to act in time to mitigate it. He was able to move his ships much faster than if he was using the board. But he also knew that the Watchtower wasn’t going to be preforming as it

was meant to. It was designed to be used with drones that Adrian himself could control via the Watchtower, the battleships were operated by people and that meant that their response time was going to be slower.

Then Adrian saw an opening that he couldn't have had the chance of exploiting if he was using the c-board. He ordered twenty of his battleships forward, taking them through a wave of Sowir fire, but also placing them perfectly to fire on the group of enemy ships that will move out of the way of the fire from the Tiamat in a few seconds.

Then as the group moved the twenty battleships got a clear line of fire for a span of twenty seconds. And that was enough for the battleships laser and particle cannon to fire and destroy fifteen of their ships. At the same time on the other side of the battle, Adrian moved Valhalla back and above his ships position to cut of the Sowir ships that will soon try to move above his left flank.

The more he used the Watchtower the worse the pain got, at the fifteen minute mark he felt the pain almost reach the point where his people pulled him out last time, but he still kept going.

* * *

Invictus

Immediately after the fleet started receiving orders from Adrian, Isani had noticed a change. It wasn't apparent at first. The Empire still lost ships, but suddenly they found themselves perfectly positioned to take advantage of short lulls in weapons fire from the Sowir ships. The Empire and the Sowir now exchanged ships at the average rate of one for fifteen.

Adrian had spread the Vanguard ships across the formation, using them to both shield the battleships and unleash devastating attacks at just precisely the right moments. The Titan, Tiamat, and Retribution followed by twenty battleships were moving at the enemy fleet, closing the range and drawing fire from the Sowir. And every time that the Sowir shifted their fire to the three Vanguard ships, the ships still in the formation punished them for it.

The flow was shifting, the Empire's ships were switching from defense to offense as the holes started to appear in the Sowir formations.

* * *

Space

As the two of the Sowir battleship groups placed in the top of their formation focused their fire at the battleships in the middle of the Empire's formation, the Vanguard ship – Invictus launched its missiles. In a span two minutes it fired its entire load, five thousand missiles burned towards the Sowir ships. By the time that the missiles entered the range of the Sowir defenses the rest of the Empire ships punched another hole in the Sowir formation, effectively cutting off the two Sowir groups from the bulk of their forces. It was perfectly executed, with just the right timing. The missiles moved unopposed towards the two groups, as their now lessened defensive power couldn't harm the advanced Vanguard missiles. The bottom of the Empire's formation fired with its laser and particle weapons at the top of the Sowir formation, providing even more cover for the missiles.

The leading wave of the missiles was three thousand Enforcer missiles, with their fields protecting them from most of the defensive fire. Out of the three thousand the Sowir managed to take down two thousand and fifty, but still almost a thousand missiles slammed into three hundred Sowir battleships. The Sowir battleships were extremely well made, and their hull upgraded and reinforced since the last time that the Empire encountered them.

Out of the three hundred, one hundred and six were destroyed immediately, others were damaged whether by missiles or debris. It didn't matter, because the last two thousand missiles slammed into the remaining ships unopposed. These were the newest of Warpaths missiles, the MAHEM MK 1 missiles. Each of the missiles had a powerful magnetic force generator that powered up just before impact, shaping the liquid metal core of the missile into a spearhead that then punctured through armor, delivering the explosives directly inside the hull.

Two thousand MAHEM missiles struck at the Sowir battleships, penetrating inside their hulls and then detonating the explosives. The explosions of the remaining Sowir battleships made it look as if they were blown up from the inside.

Chapter Twenty Two

Harbinger

The destruction of almost half of the Sowir battleships in a span of minutes gave Adrian the opportunity to press his advantage. He pushed his remaining battleships to take the Sowir weaker ships, their light and heavy cruisers as he kept their remaining three hundred battleships occupied with his Vanguard ships.

The pain in his head was now far worse than anything he had felt the first time, but somehow he managed to function despite it. He felt as if his brain was tearing itself apart, but he couldn't stop. He applied everything he had to block out the pain.

The Sowir were just now moving their "dreadnought" class in range. And they still had the numerical advantage. Adrian was down to two hundred ships, while the Sowir had around eight hundred. And he didn't know what their new class of ships could do. He knew only that they were slow, like the Empire's dreadnoughts are, which suggested that they were heavily armored.

He sent out orders for the Tiamat, Titan, Retribution, and their small group to move in the line of fire of the newly arrived Sowir ships. He would need to get them close enough to fire their weapon, which meant going through a group of three hundred light and heavy cruisers.

* * *

Tiamat, Titan, and Retribution and their battleship support entered the close range of the Sowir cruisers. Immediately Retribution opened up with its most powerful kinetic weapons. Slugs of metal exploded out of its rail guns, and turrets. The rail guns fired explosive shells, while the turrets fired grav-shells.

Hundreds of explosive shells struck the cruisers, followed by the bigger grav-shells. Once a grav-shell hit the enemy ship, the small but powerful gravity generator inside activated creating a powerful gravity event. The result destroyed the generator, but also created a small implosion at the impact point, shattering the ships armor. Then the lasers and particle beams from the battleships finished the job.

Three Vanguard ships and twenty battleships punched through the cruisers, destroying more than half of them. The rest of the cruisers were then easy targets for the main Empire's fleet.

* * *

Adrian watched as his ships punched through the Sowir cruiser formation, immediately he had the battleships in his main formation focus fire and take out the disorganized remains of the Sowir cruisers. The Sowir remaining battleships were moving to support their dreadnoughts, but Adrian had other plans. He sent orders for ships to intercept them. And then he sent orders for the Specter to move out of its position back into the field of battle and engage the Sowir dreadnoughts from the rear, creating a distraction for his other ships.

Suddenly Iris flew to stand in front of him, “Adrian something is wrong. Your implant’s connections to your brain are failing. You need to stop this now.”

“Just a little bit more Iris.” He said, but it felt harder and harder to think and act. He needed more time.

“But—”

“A few more minutes!”

* * *

Harbinger, Valhalla, Twilight, and Invictus started boosting out of their formation to intercept the two hundred and eight Sowir battleships. The laser and particle fire from the battleships hitting their fields and doing no damage. The four ships fired with all of their main weapons. Harbinger, Twilight and Invictus firing their rail guns and turrets sending a hail of metal slugs towards the battleships. The closer the four ships got to the Sowir battleships the less chance they had to evade the fire. Valhalla’s lasers constantly kept their fire on the battleships, cutting through them in seconds just as its particle cannons punched hole in their ships.

From the rest of the Empire’s formation, the remaining battleships provided suppressing fire with their own lasers and particle cannons. Their weapons were much less effective, but still powerful enough to damage and destroy the Sowir ships.

In a matter of minutes the Sowir battleship group was devastated, most of their ships destroyed and those that managed to escape damaged and limping. The four Vanguard ships moved to join the three ships that were about to engage the Sowir new ships.

* * *

The Sowir dreadnoughts were the first to open fire. Their lasers

and particle cannon were more powerful than those of their smaller ships, but still they were not enough to damage the Vanguard ships. Tiamat and Titan targeted the closest enemy ships and fired with all of their forward weaponry. Dozens of particle cannons and lasers exploded out of the advancing ship striking at the Sowir dreadnoughts, punching holes and scorching their hulls. The dreadnoughts managed to survive the fire longer than the other Sowir ships, but in the end they too succumbed. The Sowir ships started amassing damage at a faster rate as the Retribution added its own fire, followed by the twenty battleships following behind it.

The Empire's group moved even closer, to allow Retribution to use its most powerful turrets. As soon as Retribution entered in the range of its main weapon it opened fire. It fired dozens of 900mm shells, followed by an increased rate of fire with its smaller caliber rail guns. Every ship that got hit by the massive shell crumbled as its hull was blown inward. The Sowir dreadnoughts started exploding at an increased rate. And then they opened fire.

Sowir ships weapons swiveled, targeted the Vanguard ships and fired their own kinetic weapons. Hundreds of metal slugs started impacting the Vanguard ships, ignoring their field defenses. The shells were smaller and slower than their Empire counterparts, but they still started inflicting damage on the three massive ships reducing their field integrity that in turn allowed Sowir other weapons to inflict damage. The twenty battleships following behind also came upon the fire, as the Vanguard ships were too occupied to screen them. The Sowir dreadnoughts destroyed them in minutes. They were still losing ships to the Vanguard ships, but they were now inflicting damage to the previously invulnerable ships.

Sixty remaining Sowir dreadnoughts kept the pressure on the Vanguard ships, when suddenly two of their ships were blown to bits from their rear. The stealth ship Specter had arrived firing its limited weapons with deadly accuracy. Its firing had exposed its position, but using the gravity drives it quickly moved to another position. The distraction and confusion among the Sowir allowed the three ships a moment of respite.

The three ships regrouped, recovered from the shock of the Sowir counterattack and then executed a counter attack of their own. Just as they resumed their attack, their reinforcements arrived. Valhalla, Invictus, Twilight, and Harbinger opened fire from the Sowir flank.

* * *

Adrian watched as his ships took care of the last of the Sowir

dreadnoughts. He had almost lost the Retribution to the Sowir fire. They had tricked him, in the same way that he had tricked them thirty years ago. But it didn't matter, the battle was still going as his remaining one hundred and tree battleships took care of the remaining Sowir battle groups. But the victor was decided, his fleet had won.

As soon as he let himself relax the pain broke through his blocks and flooded him. He couldn't think, he couldn't see, the image of space disappeared. Frantically he tried to remember the mental command to shut down the Watchtower, but he couldn't form the thoughts.

He heard a voice speaking from the distance. "Adrian! What is wrong? I am can't make a connection with yo—" The voice cut off as Adrian managed to remember the command.

Suddenly he opened his eyes to see Sora with her front paws on his knees. Seeing his eyes open, she grabbed Adrian's coat with her teeth and dragged him to the floor. His head hit the cold metal and turned to the side. He didn't see Akash anywhere. He noticed that the doors of the room were smashed outward, but his mind couldn't process what that meant. Sora was standing above him and he could feel her using her empathic powers on him. He felt her loyalty and love. And that helped a bit, as his body turned on him.

He felt as if every nerve in his body was on fire. His eyes hurt so much that his vision was fading to nothingness and then back. His mind was filling up with nonsense, voices speaking so loudly that he couldn't even understand them. He tried to move and immediately regretted it. A shock of pain ran through his entire body and then he felt an unbearable pressure starting to build in his head. He felt as if his head was going to explode. Slowly he felt his consciousness slip away from him, just as Akash appeared from the broken doors followed by people in white coats.

* * *

Invictus – Command Center

Isani saw his c-board disengage from the Watchtower and knew that Adrian was no longer in the interface. He quickly took control of the fleet, hoping that his friend was alright. He had ninety three battleships and ten Vanguard ships remaining. Most of his battleships were damaged, but the remaining Sowir ships were in worse condition. The remaining eighty nine Sowir ships were running for the hyperspace barrier.

Isani sent out orders for the fleet to chase and destroy the

remaining ships.

Chapter Twenty Three

Six days after the battle for Nelus – Sowir border system Rasaka

Nair Hakeem Fleet Commander of the Third Fleet watched as his ships destroyed the last of the Sowir defense platforms in the orbit of a small moon. The Sowir had no presence on any of the planets in this system, they used it only as a supply point for their patrols of the border. But still they had seven platforms protecting the supply depot.

The third fleet arrived in the system two days after the event in Nelus system and the Sowir were forewarned that they were in the state of war with the Empire. As his ships entered the system he broadcasted the call for their surrender on a loop, but the Sowir never responded.

His ships had already dealt with the token defending force of thirty heavy cruisers, and with the destruction of the defense platforms they were now free to assault the depot. He sent word to the army ships that they were clear to assault the small station.

* * *

Squad Leader Zhu “Pyro” Zhang Wei sat in the Empire assault ship as it drew closer to the Sowir station. His six teammates were sitting strapped in around him. The first part of their mission was to take control of the station. They had the information from Nel databases on Sowir tech and even a few of the old devices from Consortium that should be compatible. But the truth was that they weren’t sure if it would work, a lot of Sowir tech was based on that of the Consortium, but they had also kept a lot things to themselves.

The second part of their mission was to find and take prisoner the Sowir, those who moved in the shadows. They knew that there must be some on the station, the agents they were using might be able to give an illusion of being intelligent but they can’t function without input from the Sowir.

Zhu felt the assault ship come to a stop and attach itself to the station’s hatch. The assault ship had an adaptable docking mechanism, and it was designed to be able to dock with both the Consortium and Empire’s hatches, and luckily the Sowir hadn’t changed theirs. A few moments later the light turned yellow, and Zhu’s comms sprang to life.

“Alright people, that’s your get ready signal. We are reading a lot of activity from inside the station, expect heavy resistance. And your squad is the first in position, good luck.” The voice of Company

Leader Dayo Okoro said. Company Leader was on the army ship safely away from the station, guiding the other Platoons and their squads.

"Great we get to die first." Anton "Killgrave" Maksimov said.

"Oh no, no, no. Don't you dare start with this pessimism of yours again!" Leah "Red Fury" Smith said.

"We are entering an alien station about to fight mindless killer octopus drones that are controlled by an alien race we have never laid eyes on but have basically been at war with for thirty years. Not to mention that our friends Nel here have been at war with them for about a century, and lived alongside them for about another century. And they too didn't know anything about them." Anton retorted.

"Well, at least if they are mindlessly charging in your direction you won't have any trouble aiming at them." Dson "Rock" said in his usual calm Nel tone.

"Ha, ha. That stopped being funny after the first ten times you brought it up." Anton said humorlessly.

"Perhaps to you, for us it is a source of endless amusement. And if my knowledge of Earth animals is correct, octopuses have eight limbs. These mindless drones only have seven." Dson added.

Anton grumbled some choice words too low for the rest of the squad to hear.

"Don't worry Anton, I'll guard your back." Toferami "Laas'tra" said, and then she slapped Anton on the back.

"Yeah because that will make him feel better. You can't keep yourself out of trouble for more than fifteen minutes "blade chick"." Adam "Lazy" Freeman said, using the standard version of Toferami's Nel nickname, which he knew she hated.

"Ha, ha." Toferami responded in the same exact tone as Anton.

"Alright guys, let's just focus on the Sowir, the hatch will open any minute now." Rasofari "Fig" said.

Just then the light above their heads turned green.

"That's our go signal. Everybody move!" Zhu announced over the comms.

The seven soldiers stood and got in line with Zhu taking the rear. The hatch opened and they rushed into the station, prepared to fire. As soon as Zhu entered the station he noticed something strange.

"Uh… They must know that we are coming through here right?" Anton asked as they looked around the empty hallway. "I mean they still have sensors on the hull."

"Be alert, they must be planning something. Keep moving towards checkpoint A." Zhu ordered.

His squad got in formation and moved slowly. The inside of the Sowir ship was dimly lit, and the walls were rounded which made it seem like they were walking through a tunnel. As they didn't

encounter any sign of the Sowir they started moving faster, keeping watch on their HUD for any early warnings from their suits sensors.

The Sowir must have known that they were here, but they chose to let them come inside unopposed, and that made Zhu feel uneasy. If there was one word that described Sowir perfectly it was sneaky.

Then as they reached a three way branch in the hallway Zhu signaled his squad to stop. His HUD was showing strange reading from their rear.

"Fig, Fury move back a bit and check our rear. The rest take up positions here until they get back."

They remained there waiting until the comm came back from Fig.

"*There is nothing here SL.*" Fig said.

"*Okay, come back.*" Just as Zhu finished speaking the sensors on his suit went off, and then Fig yelled out over the comm.

"*Oh fuck me! We got hostiles incoming!*"

"SL!" Killgrave yelled out at the same moment, "Hostiles from the front."

"Get ready!" Zhu said as he watched Sowir mindlessly charging their positions from three hallways. "*The two of you pull back right now.*" Zhu told Fig over the comm.

His squad got into position, and waited for the hostiles to get into range. The weapon kits they were using now were specially made for fighting on ships or stations. They couldn't use their weapons on their most powerful settings for fear of puncturing the hulls or damaging something they weren't supposed to. Zhu carried a CF-13 light assault rifle, which was a smaller and less powerful version of the CFG-02 heavy assault rifle that fired bullets using a centrifugal force.

Zhu liked the rifle, although no recoil did take some getting used to. As the enemy forces approached, Zhu was the first to open fire. His rifle sending hundreds of bullets in a span of couple seconds, punching through the enemy nonexistent armor. Most of the Sowir "agents" had no weapons mounted on their back, only melee weapons on their limbs. And they simply ran at them to get into melee range where they could use their seven powerful limbs to their maximum potential. But a few of them had the small laser turrets mounted on the backs, similar to what they used thirty years ago.

But their lasers were too weak to inflict any kind of serious damage before one of Zhu's squad mates turned his or her weapons on them. Zhu's squad was killing them quickly, but still there was so many of them that eventually four managed to get into melee range. Laas'tra and Killgrave were at the front of their formation and immediately dropped their weapons. Then blades extended from their forearms and the two started fighting the four hostiles that managed to reach them.

Laas'tra dropped into a roll as one of the aliens jumped towards her body swiping with a blade like attachment on its limb. As she dropped Zhu had a clear shot and he fired at the alien, killing it before it even touched the ground. Laas'tra got up from her roll in front of an enemy and swiped with her two monomolecular blades cutting it in three pieces.

Killgrave wasn't as lucky, one of them managed to jump and attach itself to his suit and was hacking at his shoulder with one of its free limbs. Zhu tried to get a shot off, but Killgrave was moving constantly. Then Killgrave managed to free one of his hands and slice one of the limbs holding him. After that he stabbed with his blade into its middle section and swiped out spilling blood and gore over the walls. The thing still held on so he repeated the move until it finally let go and dropped to the floor in a mangled mess.

While Killgrave was dealing with his opponent Laas'tra had killed the last of the hostiles. Then she turned to Killgrave with blood splattered all over her suit, standing in the middle of three dead bodies.

"See, I told you that I got your back!" She said.

Zhu turned to Lazy, "Go check up on Fig and Fury." As Lazy turned and ran back to help their squad mates, Zhu checked in with his imp and got an update from the command.

"Other squads have arrived on station, and they are reporting being attacked from ambushes." Zhu said.

"There is about thirty of them here, if they attacked the other squads with the same numbers they still have much more troops. A station of this size usually held a large number of Sowir – their agents." Dson said.

"Probably." Zhu responded, as the three from the rear returned. Fig and Furry too were covered in gore.

"All ok?" Zhu asked.

"Yes. About ten of them were on their way to attack us from the back." Fig responded.

Zhu check the map on his HUD and decided to take the fastest and the most direct route to their target. "Alright squad, the station's command center is about a kilometer that way. We are going fast and alert, keep watch for more ambushes." Zhu said pointing at the far left hallway.

In a brisk pace they covered ground quickly. The enemy attempted two more ambushes but both times the Empire soldiers prevailed. Finally they arrived at the door to the command center, in front of it eight of the hostiles stood guard. But these were fully dressed in combat armor with double barreled weapons on their backs.

“Alright this is it, we only need to get through those guards.” Zhu said. His squad was standing behind a corner where the guards couldn’t see them.

“Let me try the freeze grenade.” Killgrave said.

“You do know that that is not its name?” Dson asked sarcastically.

“I’m not calling it that other name, freeze grenade is much cooler.” Killgrave responded smartly.

“Alright Anton.” Zhu said before they could get into a name debate, “The rest of you get ready, once the grenade goes off take them out.”

Killgrave stepped to the corner’s edge and retrieved a device from the back of his suit. It was a bit bulkier than an ordinary grenade, silver in color and barrel shaped. Killgrave pressed two buttons simultaneously and a small red light appeared. Then he pressed a few more buttons, stepped out of the cover and threw the grenade at the enemy position, and quickly moved back behind cover.

The Laser Induced Energy Removing Device or LIERD for short, bounced off the floor and rolled at the feet of the eight guards. Before it even stopped its roll the device started releasing high pressure gas filling the area, engulfing the guards in it. As soon as all of the gas was released the device opened up and a high powered wide band laser flashed out of it. In an instant the laser’s photons knocked the electrons out of the gas’s atoms, which made them lose energy and at the same time heat. The area around the guards froze. Their armored suits got encased in a small layer of ice while their weapons electronics became nonoperational at such extreme cold.

A second later bullets and lasers fired on the helpless guards cutting them down.

“That was so cool!” Kilgrave said, then he turned to his squad mates. “Cool? You get it right? Because it is—”

“We got it, we got it.” Dson interrupted.

Zhu walked up to the dead guards and to the big doors, he gestured for Red Fury to get started working on opening them.

“Alright guys our targets are most likely behind these door. So Killgrave, Laas’tra, and Dson, change your ammo to stun rounds. You will be going in first, if there is more of these “agents” inside move aside and let the rest of us deal with them. In the event we find our targets, first demand surrender by playing the recording prepared in Nel. Clear?”

Affirmatives came from the three and Zhu moved back, letting them stand in front of the door ready to jump in as soon as Fury manages to open it.

* * *

Anton “Killgrave” checked his rifle one more time. He has been waiting for the door to open for only a minute, but it felt longer to him. He was never very good at being still, especially not when he was amped up on adrenaline and performance drugs. Then just as he was about to ask what was taking so long, he heard Red Fury say that she got it, and the door started to raise upwards quickly. As soon as there was enough room, Anton crouched and entered keeping his weapon ready.

He stopped short a few steps into the room as he came face to face with three beings standing in the middle of the room. These aliens were slightly taller than him in the suit, they had three tentacle like legs, similar to those of the beings they had been fighting till now. But from their waist up they had something resembling a human torso, only much less muscled, and some kind of flap at the center of it.

They had two arms from shoulder like extension at the end of their torso, and one more arm on their back that reached above their head. After a short neck came the head that was elongated and widened towards the end in a bony crest. The thing had no mouth that he could see, and had something that looked like gills on the lower sides of their face. The eyes were small and full black. Their skin was in shades of dark turquoise.

Anton swallowed hard and then turned using his imp to broadcast the surrender demand in Nel over his external speakers. The Sowir had been a part of the Consortium for a long time, they must know the language.

As the speakers played the message the rest of the squad got inside, moving to the sides while they kept their weapons trained on the three individuals. The Sowir didn’t move nor acknowledged the message in any way. A few seconds after the recording finished, Anton tried to play it again when he felt a bit lightheaded. He suddenly got an urge to move his weapon to the side and fire it, and it seemed perfectly reasonable for him to do so. His rifle started to move off his target slowly. Then after it moved a few centimeters, and what seemed like hours later, he remembered his training. The endless drilling into his head about one thing. He wasn’t supposed to move his sights of an enemy.

Anton’s mind cleared and he turned the rifle back and squeezed the trigger. The stun slug hit the Sowir in the chest, sending an electrical charge through its body, and it collapsed on the ground twitching. As if a spell had been broken, Laas’tra and Dson fired their own weapons felling the other two Sowir. For a few seconds no one moved or said anything. Then Anton turned and looked around the room at his squad mates who were all standing there frozen looking at

the aliens.

"Guys… I think that these aliens just tried to get inside my head."

Chapter Twenty Four

Two days after the battle for Nelus

Sestar Nimuse of House Jar Tel sat in yet another council meeting in the last few days, listening to the Sestar Tavaar of House Nor Ral preach about the great victory for their people. It made her sick just listening to him as he took credit for the destruction of the Sowir. It had been a long time since Sestar Jusan of House Dai Ven defected to the human led Empire, and the things had only gotten worse in his absence. House Nor Ral ruled with an iron fist, enforcing curfews, limiting the already limited freedom of the people, all the while taking the power and wealth for himself.

Nimuse now older, and wiser, knew that things couldn't keep going like this for long. And when she heard the last idiocy that Tavaar ordered she knew that the time was now. Tavaar had ordered the fleet ships in orbit of Nelus to join with their fleet and Nelat and drive the Empire's ships out of their system. And with that Nimuse could no longer sit quietly. After the meeting ended, Nimuse used her family's significant wealth and influence to set things in motion. She might not have the power to end the idiocy of the council on her own, but she had enough to light up the spark that would grow into a roaring flame to consume and burn away the filth that had grown at the heart of her world.

* * *

Four days after the battle for Nelus

Massar Erani sat on the bridge of his battleship, watching on his screens as the Nelus remaining ships sped from his home world towards the force garrisoned in the orbit of Nelat, the fifth planet in the Nelus system. The area in which the greatest Sowir fleet Erani had ever laid eyes upon was just destroyed by a much smaller number of ships.

Eran, like every other person on Nelus had watched the battle, and had seen their force retreat and leave the Empire ships to be slaughtered by the immense Sowir force. He knew why the commander did that. The council had sent an order and ordered them to pull back, and Eran didn't oppose that order. Over his entire upbringing and adult life he had always obeyed the council, it didn't even cross his mind to countermand the council orders even though the fleet would have followed his orders over those of the council.

And now he was ordered to meet up with that force and chase the

Empire ships out of the system. How idiotic the council truly is if it believed that his ships were capable of doing that. Eran had seen what the Empire's ships can do, and even outnumbered as they were his ships wouldn't stand a chance. Not to mention it being wrong. The Empire had warned them about the Sowir, and then even sent ships to help them. And the council wanted to reward that help with insults and threats.

But Nelus and Eran were ruled by the council, it had always been that way. To disobey was unimaginable. And yet Eran could think of nothing else.

"Massar?" Erani's communications officer said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"You have a priority one message from Nelus."

Erani checked his screens and saw the forwarded message, he was instructed to listen to the message in private. So he got up from his chair and walked over to his ready room, sat down behind his desk and played the message. He was surprised to see that it was a message from Sestar Nimuse of the council.

"*Massar Erani. I have chosen to send you this message in secret, bypassing the council, because I believe that this last insanity is the last drop. Nelus can take no more. After Sesatar Jusan left, I have come to realize just how much damage the council was doing to our people. And I started building influence and power in order to change things. But house Nor Ral is too powerful and alone I could do nothing. But you Massar Erani now have the power to change things. This message is a plea. Take action, the council must be disbanded. Help the people take their world back. Whether you do what I know you feel is right or report this message to the council and remain their minion, I will already have started a revolution on Nelus. The people cannot stay silent anymore."*

Stunned Erani looked at the blank screen for several minutes. And then he rose up, he knew what he had to do.

* * *

Invictus

Isani sat in the command center of his ship, the remaining Empire ships remained in the system still, except for the Harbinger that had raced back to Sanctuary in order to provide Adrian with the best medical care. He hoped that Adrian would be alright. He knew that using the Watchtower was dangerous, but they had no choice. Without it Isani doubted that they could have defeated the Sowir force. Perhaps they could have, but he was sure that they would have

lost more ships.

Isani was in the system because the Empire wanted an explanation for the betrayal of their fleet. The Nelus Council had, like it always does, threatened and started moving the rest of their fleet from Nelus to join the ships that had been fighting the Sowir.

And the Emperor wasn't amused. Nelus had the advantage in numbers, but their ships were even worse than those of the Sowir, and Isani was fully prepared to pit the remaining third of the Warpath fleet against them. But when the two Nelus forces joined forces they didn't try to attack the Empire fleet.

Instead the entire fleet turned and headed back to Nelus. The Lighthouse's sensor drones had intercepted communications between Nelus and the fleet, or rather communication from Nelus to the fleet. The Nelus ships didn't respond back. To all appearances the Nelus fleet seemed to have gone rogue. One of the drones followed the fleet giving Isani and his ships live feed of what was happening light hours away.

The Nelus fleet reached the effective range of the Nelus defense platforms. One of them even fired on the ships, but the fire ceased within minutes. An enormous amount of chatter was happening between the fleet, the stations, and military installations on the ground. The drone couldn't get everything but apparently a coup was in progress. The military in concert with the Nelus people rose up against the Council. That was three days ago.

The fighting lasted for two days, but eventually the military and the people overthrew the Council. Another day passed before the people of Nelus sent a message to Isani's ships. The drone that was close to their fleet and undetectable received the message and passed it on via FTL comms, ahead of the light speed signal that the message was sent in. Isani watched the message, and intrigued by it recorded one of his own. Then he used the drone to send the response back hours before Nelus expected it.

* * *

A day later Invictus with an escort of six ships met up with the diplomatic ship from Nelus halfway to the planet. He insisted that their team comes on the Invictus, which they surprisingly agreed to. Isani and his second – Sub Commander Liz Turner sat and waited in the meeting room as the security escorted them through the ship to him. A few minutes later the doors opened and three Nel walked in.

Isani recognized two of them. The one who appeared to be in the lead was Retsar Erani, or at least he was at the time Isani knew him,

now his dress told him that he was promoted to Massar – the supreme commander of Nel fleets. The second person he recognized, was Sestar Nimuse of the House Jar Tel, who was now an old woman. The third was a younger man, who Isani didn't recognize.

Restar – or rather Massar Erani spoke first.

"I didn't know that Retsar Isani had a son." He commented.

Isani smiled. "I didn't." He said. That confused the two who knew him previously and both of them studied him closely.

The first to respond was Nimuse. "Retsar Isani was in his fifties when Sowir attacked Nuva, he would be my age now. You are obviously in your thirties."

"It's just Isani, or Commander Isani now. And yes, you are correct I am eighty seven years old." Isani said.

"That is impossible." Erani said.

"The Empire possesses many advances not known to Nelus or the Sowir." Isani said simply.

"So you have some kind of rejuvenation technology?" Nimuse asked yearningly.

Isani at her feeble form and decided to answer with the truth. "The Empire does have rejuvenation tech, which I have used, but we also possess the means to stop the aging process altogether. I will never lose my young appearance, nor will I physically age."

"That is absurd! Immortality is a myth!" The third Nel said.

Isani turned to look at him and smiled. He knew that such open usage facial expressions was something that Nel that were not part of the Empire rarely saw outside of family units.

Ereni made a Nel gesture that indicated calmness and restraint to the young Nel. "We are not here to discuss technologies, and what is or is not possible Hishok Tansi." Ereni said.

Upon hearing the young man's tittle Isani was surprised. Hishok roughly translated to citizen in standard, and it referred to ordinary people who were not a part of an organized group.

Ereni turned back to Isani and made a gesture signaling apology, surprising Isani yet again. Nel, and especially Nel from Nelus were not known for being humble. Isani answered with the gesture meaning acceptance, and then gestured for them to continue.

Eren visibly relaxed and started speaking. "We would like to open diplomatic talks with the Empire, we are here now hoping to talk with the leader of this fleet."

Isani frowned. "You've been talking to him." He said.

The three suddenly looked flabbergasted. Isani looked at them as they exchanged looks and glanced at Liz at Isani's side, who had kept silent. Then Isani realized what surprised them.

"You thought that the leader of this fleet needed to be human."

He stated. Seeing their chagrin, Isani pressed on. “Well, you are right. The commander of this fleet is a human, but he was injured during the fighting and I as his second have assumed command. But the Nel and humans are all members of the Empire and as such have equal rights.”

“We didn’t mean to imply anything, it is just that the last time that we had contact with you we dealt with a human.” Nimuse said.

“As I said, we are all equal in the Empire. Your request for diplomatic talk is accepted. I invite you to stay aboard the Invictus until I inform the Emperor. I am sure that he would want to send an expert negotiation team to speak with you. But I warn you that he is not happy, the actions of your fleet had lost us many lives.” Isani said.

“We understand. It is because of the insane orders of the Council that the people and the fleet finally found the will to break away from their rule.” Hishok Tansi said.

“You finally taking control over your own lives is good, but there is a lot of mistrust between my people and yours. In time we might be able to repair it, for now you are welcome aboard my ship.” With that Isani left the room leaving telling Liz to take care of their guests over his implant. He headed toward his quarters to talk to the Emperor.

* * *

Sanctuary

“So Nelus wants to talk?” Sumia asked. On the Emperor’s request she had been staying at her house on Sanctuary, in case that he needed to speak with her in person on matters concerning Nelus or the Sowir.

“It looks like it. As they say they had rebelled against the Council’s rule, and wish to open talks with us.” Tomas said.

“I can’t believe that they rebelled… The ruling Houses always had such an iron grip on Nelus.” Sumia commented.

“It has been a long time, and their society had stood still. No advances, no expansion, they were stagnating. Seeing our smaller fleet defeat such overwhelming Sowir fleet must have been the last drop.” Tomas said.

“Well, at least they had finally come to their senses. So what do I have to do with this?” Sumia asked.

Tomas smiled at her perceptiveness. “I want you to head the talks with them.”

“I knew that it was going to be something like that…” She said resigned.

“So you’ll do it?”

“Yes, I’ll go talk with them. But I will need a list of things that we

want from the talk." Sumia said.

"Already prepared." Tomas said and handed her a small data chip.

Sumia shook her head. "Of course it is."

* * *

Hishok Tansi sat in a spacious room provided to him aboard the Emprie ship with Sestar Nimuse and Massar Erani. It had been a few days since their arrival, and they had been on informed that an envoy from the Empire was on her way to Nelus in order to speak with them. But in the meantime the three had been allowed to look through some of the Empire's databases, mainly their history as well as entertainment channels. But they were also allowed to view a small portion of their tech databases.

"How could we have allowed Tavaar and the rest of the council to blind us so much. To let us convince that the humans were so primitive when they first contacted us?" Hishok Tansi asked.

"Tavaar is a great speaker and manipulator, he can spin anything in his favor. And we trusted him blindly because we were afraid. Fear can make people do insane things. I too was content to keep my head down and accumulate wealth and power, it took me a long time to realize how wrong I was." Nimuse said.

"I can understand how the council fooled the people, it is they who controlled the media and information. But the fleet was different. Our ships were close enough to take readings of the human ships when they first arrived, and we watched their records of battle for Nuva. And yet once Tavaar's experts came out with their story we took it as truth, believing in it even though we should have known better." Massar Erani added.

"Have you had the chance to look at their technology?" Hishok Tansi asked.

"Yes. If even half of it is true, they are leagues ahead of us now." Erani answered.

"And their history… Their home world is destroyed, and thirty years ago they were just one colony! Now they have spread so much and so fast… It is mind boggling." Tansi said.

"Did you come across the information on the connection between us and humans?" Nimuse asked, her face twitching for a moment.

"No, there is so much to read I didn't have the chance…" Tansi said.

"You should look it up, apparently there is much more to Jusan's defection to the Empire than it was apparent to us." Nimuse said.

“I’ll look it up as soon as I get the chance.” He promised, then hesitated before continuing to speak. “But, do we even know what we want from these talks?”

“Establishing good and neighborly relations are our priority.” Eran said, “It will take time for us to repair the damage done by the council. We can worry later about what we want from the relationship.”

Tansi and Nimuse both agreed. The three of them spent the next hour fleshing out the details of what their approach would be, and then retired to their respective rooms to rest. All of them knew that the negotiations would be long and difficult.

Chapter Twenty Five

Ten days after the battle for Nelus – Sowir inner system Laraska

Fleet Commander Bethany Jones-Wright sat on the command center of her flagship leading the Second Fleet as they were taking control of the Laraska system. They had been fighting in the system for three days now. She got the report from the battle at Nelus, and she knew that Adrian managed to defeat a Sowir force almost six times larger than his own. But that he also suffered a lot of losses, she didn't read too much of the report, focusing instead on her own battle.

She had already received word from the Third Fleet about their action in the Rasaka system. The information on the true Sowir and their apparent mind abilities was very interesting, but not really important to her efforts to take this system. Her army regiments were informed of it, and as she understood it, while the ability was amazing and they didn't understand anything about it yet, it could be countered easily simply by one being forewarned. But it was the army that would deal with that when they start taking the shipyards and stations in the system, she needed to deal with the Sowir in space.

And while the system didn't have many ships defending it, it was one of their major industrial systems. They had significant fixed defenses. She had managed to goad and then destroy sixty of one hundred and forty enemy ships in the system on the first day of fighting, then she focused on destroying their defense platforms from far out of their effective range by using her ships kinetic weapons.

That was one big advantage of mass movers, their range didn't really have a limit. They would speed through space until they impact something. Which was great at destroying target that didn't move, or at least moved on predictable fixed courses. By the end of the second day she had destroyed the last of the platforms, and now the rest of the Sowir ships were moving to engage hers in a pointless attack. She moved her one hundred Kraken class ships to intercept the remaining eighty Sowir ships.

* * *

Eighty Sowir ships moved in a tight concave lens formation, speeding towards the Empire dreadnoughts firing their missiles and lasers. The Empire's ships moved slowly towards the Sowir and the incoming wave of missiles and laser fire. The Kraken class field defense was weaker than that of the Vanguard ships, but even so the Sowir laser fire was being dissipated completely before it could have a

chance of touching the hull. As the missiles entered the range of the dreadnoughts point defenses they started to die. Within a minute all of the Sowir missiles were gone and the Empire ships changed to offense. They opened fire with their particle weapons blowing the smaller Sowir ships to bits.

Soon the last of the Sowir ships exploded, and were just minutes before stood eighty ships now only a slowly expanding field of debris was.

* * *

With the destruction of the last threat to her ships in the system, Bethany gave the go ahead to the army to begin the operations of taking control of the Sowir shipyards and stations. The ground would be more difficult, but after they take control of the space installations they will turn to it. For now she stood away from the planet, they didn't know what numbers the Sowir – true Sowir had on the grounds, but they did have a significant number of their agents. The plan was to try and get the Sowir to surrender, but the offer wouldn't be coming until the prisoners from the border system are transferred back to Sanctuary and interrogated. In the meantime Beth would have her hands full with securing the system.

* * *

Four days later – Sowir shipyard

Platoon Leader Sahib Adin cursed himself for the hundredth time as he charged an enemy with his mono-blade. He stabbed the seven limbed alien through the top of its body hoping to impale its secondary brain and kill it instantly. They had found out early on that if the secondary brain still functioned the agents would keep fighting. As he pulled his blade back and threw the alien of himself he again cursed his luck. As soon as the Exploration Fleet finished with the Furvor his platoon was recalled and sent to the Second Fleet as the most experienced unit that the Empire had.

Which was true in a way, his platoon had fought the Sowir thirty years ago on Nuva, and then they fought the Furvor on Trivax. And because of that he was now moving through the Sowir shipyard hacking and slashing at countless waves of the enemy. They couldn't use high powered weapons both for fear of puncturing the hull, and because the Emperor wanted as many Sowir facilities intact.

The Empire had far better building technology with their

fabricators, but most of the Sowir shipyards had once belonged to the Consortium, and while they were not as good as the Empire's they would still be an enormous asset in their expansion. The plan was for the Empire to absorb the Sowir territory. Which in itself will be a colossal undertaking that will last years, as the Sowir territory was almost double the size of the Empire.

Sahib climbed back to his feet checking his HUD for any damage to his suit. When he saw none he turned around and looked at the situation. Loca was just now finishing the last of the Sowir agents, she hit it with her shield and then shot it with her low velocity hand gun several times killing it.

"You were supposed to be in front." Sahib told her.

"They rushed me, and I might be strong but when a dozen of these bastards jump you, you pull back." She said defensively.

Sahib shook his head and sighed. Fighting had been gruesome. The Sowir agents fought like mindless beasts, which in a way they were. Fighting them wasn't really hard, once they start a fight they don't back off. The intel they got from the Third Fleet and Sanctuary indicated that the true Sowir can issue general orders to their agents from afar, but that for more delicate and intelligent control they need to be close. And there had been a few instances where the Sowir followed their agents in battle. And those skirmishes were always much more dangerous than when they just let them loose.

Most of the people that the Empire lost, died when they were fighting Sowir in direct control of their agents. Another additional danger was their mind ability. They couldn't take control of the human or Nel mind, not like they did with their agents. But they could distract, and in battle even a moment of distraction could prove fatal. And the more they fought the better the Sowir got at it, at least those that survived the engagements with the Empire soldiers.

The only upside was that the Sowir weren't really fighters, without their agents they were easily subdued. The orders were to take any Sowir they could prisoner, but not at expense of lives. Which was now much harder as the Sowir no longer moved around the station without their agents. And the only way to reduce the effectiveness of the agents was to take out the Sowir controlling them.

Sahib motioned for Loca to follow, and the two of them continued to follow the map on his HUD. His platoon was given the mission to find and recover any remaining data from the Sowir computers in the inner ring of the shipyard. Which was mostly free of the Sowir, save for the few that were left behind as proven by the attack a few minutes ago. The Sowir had destroyed most of the computers and data when they pulled back towards the center of the shipyard. The Empire had control of the outer ring and troops were now pushing inside the

center.

But Sahib's superiors hoped that some were overlooked. The Empire had equipment able to interface with the Sowir computers as the ones they used were still Consortium technology, this entire system was in fact one that belonged to the Nel before the Sowir took it, and the Empire knew everything about it from Nuva.

Sahib had split his people into teams of two, and each team was checking a different area. Sahib and Loca arrived at a doors that were blown inward, probably by the initial assault by the Empire's troops. They stepped inside, their suits lights illuminating the room. In one of the corners Sahib noticed a small flashing light. He motioned for Loca to keep watch as he went to check it out.

He came close to the terminal and retrieved a device that looked similarly to a datapad from his back. He used the connector on his device to plug it into the Sowir terminal, then waited as the software accessed and translated everything in standard. A few minutes later the device pinged and Sahib looked down.

"Jackpot." Sahib said.

"You got something?" Loca asked.

"Yeah, it looks like this was the office of a Sowir who was overseeing the construction of specially requested items. Hmm… Alright, if I am getting this right this shipyard wasn't only building ships, but also any kind of specialized equipment." He kept scrolling through the lists and reports. "Aha. I found the list of requests by priority. It appears that they were trying to figure out how to build a digging machine? Something for work underground, that could create tunnels big enough for their troops to pass through. But was also silent, and fast…" Sahib said.

"Why would they need that?" Loca asked.

"Don't know. Let me see if I can – Ah, here it is. The product was supposed to go to a planet designated as Guxaxac…" Sahib said.

"Wait, that planet's name is familiar. Where did I hear that name?" Loca asked.

"That's the Guxcacul home world." Sahib responded.

"Why would they need something like that there?"

Sahib kept quiet for a few seconds. "I don't know, let me copy the data. We should get this back to the tech guys, maybe they can get something more out of it."

Chapter Twenty Six

January; Year 32 – Sanctuary

Consciousness returned slowly to Adrian, his eyes opened and immediately closed as the bright light from the window shined right into them. It took him a couple of tries to get them fully opened and to be able to take in the room he was in. It looked similar to the hospital room he was in at Warpath, except that the window meant he was on a planet. Slowly he managed to raise himself to a semi sitting position. His movements alerted the beast lying on the floor on his left side.

Sora raised her head and jumped up immediately once she saw his eyes open. She released a loud roar and pushed her head on his chest. Slowly Adrian reached up to pet her behind the ears.

"Hello to you too." He managed to say hoarsely.

Then the door opened and a person walked in.

"Adrian!" Laura, his adoptive mother yelled out and quickly walked up to him and gave him the hug.

"Hey…" He said weakly.

"I'm so relieved that you are awake!" Laura said when she finally let him go.

"Yeah, well, so am I." Adrian added softly, "What happened?"

"I commed the doctor, let's wait for him." Laura said evadingly. "How are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly I feel great, my throat hurts a bit, but other than that everything seems good. Better than the last time." Adrian said. He saw Laura look at him strangely, and he could see the worry in her eyes. "How long was I out? What happened with the fleet? I assume that we won as I am not dead."

"You were unconscious for twenty days. And yes, the fleet won. Eleven Sowir ships managed to escape but we won."

"Good." Adrian said relived. Then the doors opened again and Alexander walked in followed by Akash who immediately did the same thing Sora did. Adrian laughed and petted him behind the ears.

"You are awake." Alex said, there was a touch of disbelief in his voice.

"Obviously." Adrian said rolling his eyes. He saw Alex and Laura exchange a look. Then Alex walked over to the monitoring machines beside his bed and took a look. Then he turned back to Adrian.

"How are you feeling? Does everything feel the same?" Alex asked hesitantly.

"Well, yes. What is this about?" Adrian said, but then he noticed that something was missing.

"Iris?" Adrian asked. There was no response. "Where is Iris?" He asked out loud as he heard no response from her.

The two exchanged looks again, and Adrian snapped. "Stop dancing around and answer me! What is wrong?"

Alex sighed and looked Adrian in the eyes. "Adrian, we thought that you wouldn't wake up again."

"Why did you think that?"

"We don't really know what happened to you. To your brain actually. It changed somehow…"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Adrian asked annoyed.

"We don't know if this was the result of you using the Watchtower, or if it was something else. But your brain underwent a change, a physical change. Its entire structure shifted and new tissue grew. Your brain is about four percent larger now, and the ridges of your cerebral cortex have softened, some have disappeared entirely. Your brain waves have shifted significantly. The parts of your brain that were there before, have normal readings. But the new parts and the shifts have created something that we can't understand. Parts that you weren't using before are now active. Not to mention what happened to your nervous system."

Adrian looked at his friend open-mouthed, then turned to Laura who looked worried. "And that means what?" Adrian asked Alex.

"We don't know Adrian. We thought that you wouldn't wake up, and if you did that you wouldn't be you anymore."

"Well, I am me. So where is Iris? Why isn't she speaking?"

"When this transformation started, the nanites in your body tried to repair what they saw as damage. That is why you felt so much pain while using the Watchtower, it happened the first time also. The nanites probably stopped the transformation the first time. But the second time you were pushing your brain harder and further with the Watchtower, and we believe that that stress is what triggered this. Only this time you didn't stop. And the nanites kept trying to prevent it, until Iris realized what was happening and instructed the nanites to stop."

"You still didn't answer my question." Adrian said, fear gripping his heart.

"The change severed all connections with your implant Adrian. The entire structure of your brain changed. Iris instructed the nanites to break down the implant, so that it didn't impede the transformation." Alex said.

Adrian immediately felt his fear intensify. Iris wasn't inside the implant, but her core that was separate. "And the core?" He asked quickly.

Alex shifted uncomfortably, "We did manage to retrieve the core.

But you and Iris were a unique case, she was intertwined with your brain intimately, we don't know how much of her is left."

"Where is she?"

"At the Research and Development center here on Sanctuary. They have been trying to repair the core and reactivate her, but I don't know much else." Alexander said.

"I am going there now." Adrian said and swung his legs off the bed. Alex immediately grabbed and pushed him back to the bed.

"You are not going anywhere, we need to do test and make sure that everything is alright. What happened to Iris won't change if you go there. I'll call the people working on her and tell you what is happening, but you need to stay here where we can monitor you." Alex said looking at Adrian, "Please." He added.

Finally Adrian relented. "Alright, but do your tests quickly, I am feeling fine and I don't plan on being in this bed for long."

* * *

"Adrian finally woke up." Laura said.

"He did? I thought that the doctors said it wasn't likely." Tomas said.

"They can't explain it. But then again they can't explain what happened either." Laura said.

"And he is himself?" Seo-yun asked.

"Thankfully, yes. I talked with him for hours yesterday, he was completely himself."

"That's great. But I am still worried about it, the sphere's computer knows what happened, but refuses to elaborate, he did say that this wasn't life threatening. Whatever it is." Seo-yun said.

Laura nodded. After a month of watching over Adrian not knowing if he would wake up, she felt relieved to have him awake. The doctors were still doing tests and trying to figure out what happened.

"Hopefully everything will be alright." Tomas added. "But we still have a war to fight even without him. Is there any word from the fleets?"

"The Third Fleet has complete control over the Rasaka system and are in the process of taking the other border systems with Rasaka as their base." Laura said.

"And the Second Fleet?" Tomas asked.

"There is still fighting going on the shipyards, we have only taken about half of them and two thirds of their stations. All prisoners are sent back to Sanctuary, but there isn't a lot of them. We have

encountered only a small number of Sowir, compared to their agents which are numerous." Laura answered.

"And have gotten anything from the prisoners from Rasaka?"

Laura glanced at Seo-yun letting her answer.

"Sadly, no. The Sowir have no ability to speak, we believe that they use their mental abilities to communicate. And we aren't putting any of our people close enough to a conscious Sowir for them to influence them. We have however recovered the devices that the Sowir use to translate their way of communication into a spoken language. The devices are currently on-route to Sanctuary, so we will try to establish communications once they arrive." Seo-yun said.

"Good. Anything else?" Tomas asked.

"Well. We have analyzed the data that we managed to recover from the Sowir stations and shipyards in Laraska. It appears that they were building a lot of machines with the purpose of fighting underground. And all of these machines were going to Guxaxac." Laura said.

"Guxaxac? Why would they need them there?" Tomas asked.

"We didn't understand either. So we sent a probe to the system. We just got the sensor feeds this morning. The Sowir have a fleet of about two hundred ships in orbit of Guxaxac, and about half of them are troop ships. And they don't have any station in orbit or permanent installations on the ground…" Laura answered.

"You don't think that… But it has been more than a hundred years!" Tomas exclaimed.

"The Guxcacul are subterranean. And we know that their cities are deep underground close to their planet's core. And Sowir aren't really suited for battles in closed quarters where the numbers of their agents mean little." Laura commented.

"They could still be alive… We need to make sure." Tomas said.

Laura smiled. "I already have plans to send a team to the planet, but we will need Warpath's Specter to do it. I'm sure that Adrian would approve, but I will check with Isani just in case."

"Alright then, let us hope that we finally get some good news."

Chapter Twenty Seven

February; Year 32 – Guxaxac system

Vanguard warship Specter cruised through the Guxcacul home system, undetected by the Sowir forces in the orbit of the large rocky planet. In its only bay it held the stealth shuttle that was retrieved from Earth and was the basis for the drive technology that Specter made use of. The shuttle had been upgraded with the latest of the Empire tech and weapons that they could put in it. And inside its small hull sat eight human shaped figures dressed in battle suits and one Guxcacul.

Sahib Adin tried to figure out how it was that he always managed to get into the most dangerous places. Just a few days ago he was fighting Sowir, and now he was on board a stealth Warpath ship, sitting in a stealth shuttle that was at least three decades old about to drop on a planet that was apparently under Sowir siege for at least a hundred years.

"So, how are we going to find your people again?" Sahib asked.

The Guxcacul moved turned his head in Sahib's direction, the small light in the shuttle illuminating the silver armor that he wore over his plates. It was Warpath made, and Sahib had to admit that it was impressive. The Guxcacul didn't like the restriction of full body encased in a battle armor, so the people at Warpath created a suit that was more like an exoskeleton which boosted his strength and speed, while also protecting his vital areas.

"If they are still alive, they will find us." Riss said via the translator somewhere beneath the armored plate on his chest.

"Great, so we just wander around aimlessly?" Sahib asked.

The Guxcacul released a series of noises that the translator didn't translate, and which Sahib was pretty sure was laughter. Then it changed and he spoke. "No, our sensors have mapped out Sowir positions on the ground, so we are going to one of the areas where they have no presence. There was a small military outpost near the surface in the area that we are going to check out. If it was already destroyed by the Sowir or abandoned we will proceed deeper underground looking for clues."

"Even better." Sahib grumbled. Spending time with his team underground was a sure way to get him to go insane.

Then their comms chirped and their pilot spoke. "Alright guys this is it, the Specter can't chance getting any closer. We are going the rest of the way solo."

Immediately after Sahib felt the shuttle move out of the Specter's bay. The trip was uneventful, until they reached the planet's

atmosphere and the shuttle started to shake. But soon enough it leveled off, and the rest of the trip went smoothly. Once they landed the pilot waited for a few minutes making sure that they had landed undetected and then he opened the back hatch.

"Well guys, this is it. I will be waiting here for as long as I can, if the Sowir detect the shuttle… I doubt that I will be able to escape. So do try to hurry."

Sahib and his squad exited, followed by Riss. Immediately Riss took the lead and they started moving across the rocky and sandy ground.

"So, when were you last here?" Garth asked.

"About hundred years ago, before the Sowir offensive reached this far." Riss answered.

"And you still remember the way?" Garth asked.

"Guxcacul don't forget." Riss responded. The rest remained silent following Riss as he led them towards a large rock formation. It took them maybe thirty minutes to get there, and then Riss guided them to a cave opening that was hidden and unnoticeable from the distance.

The eight of them entered inside through a narrow opening only to see it widen the further they went, until it was wide enough for four humans to walk side by side in their battle suits. Riss lead them downward in the dark for what seemed like hours, navigating the twisting tunnels and leading them deeper and deeper underground. Riss apparently could see in the dark, the rest of the squad used night vision capabilities of their helmets to see.

Then eventually Riss stopped and turned to look at the wall of the tunnel. "We have arrived." He said.

"Uh… We have?" Loca asked.

Riss ignored her and placed one of his limbs on the wall, then a few moments later the entire side of the wall moved outward and to the side, revealing a dimly illuminated hallway. He led them inside.

The hallway led to a wide and tall room, with terminals both on the walls and on the ground, with kind of staircases on the walls. Riss quickly moved to one of it and accessed.

It was encouraging that the room still had power, but they all waited for Riss to do his thing. He accessed the terminal an after a few minutes stepped back.

"They are alive." He said ecstatically. "A patrol passed through here four months ago, they have been using this route to get to the surface unnoticed."

"That is great. Are they scheduled to come back soon? Or are we going to have to go and look for them." Sahib asked.

"They don't have a schedule they just came and go as they need. And after so long of a period fighting there can't be many of them left.

And this planet is vast, our tunnels and cities spread out. We will never find them on our own. But I can use this terminal to send a message to all the other active terminals of the other outposts. Get them to come to us." Riss said.

"Alright let's do that." Sahib said.

"I will need to send a message to all active stations. And if I do that everyone watching will know where we are. If Sowir have control of any intact post they will know too." Riss said.

Sahib weighed his options, then decided. "We have no choice, send the message."

* * *

Three hours later they still hadn't received any word back. Riss had sent a message in Guxcacul, saying who they were but also providing personal information about himself that could be verified in the Guxcacul databases. He even included a video of himself and Sahib's team in the message. But if anyone had received the message didn't see fit to respond.

Sahib was inside the small outpost with Riss, Red, and Bella, while the rest of his team kept watch outside in the tunnels.

"Are you sure that you sent it?" Bella asked.

"Yes, I am sure." Riss answered, and Red grunted. Bella started pacing back and forth across the room.

Another few minutes passed and then someone spoke over the comms.

"PL, we got incoming over here." Loca said.

All four of them inside jumped at that. "Guxcacul?" Sahib asked.

"I don't think so PL. You better get here, I think that our Sowir buddies are crashing the party."

Sahib ran towards the exit, with the rest following close behind him. By the time he reached the exit, the others were already firing their weapons into the wave of incoming Sowir agents. Laser fire from the mass was scorching the ground, but the return fire from the Empire soldiers was cutting them down at an amazing rate. Soon enough the rest joined the fight. Using rocks around the tunnel as cover they kept firing at the enemy.

Riss was standing behind one of the bigger rocks and fired his custom made weapons. He had a rifle attached to each of his two top arms and was firing the powerful plasma blasts at the enemy, killing them by scores.

But no matter how many they killed more kept coming, and soon the few from the swarm entered close range. Garth and Red moved to

engage them in the melee with their mono-blades, while the others tried to keep the rest of the hostiles at bay.

By the way that the enemy was fighting, Sahib knew that there was no Sowir guiding them, which was a blessing. But it was also just a small comfort, as the numbers of the agents were overwhelming. Then more and more entered the melee range, making difficulties to the two soldiers.

Sahib could see the tide turning in the enemy's favor, soon the line will falter and he and his people will die. Then a shudder went through the ground and a top of the tunnel wall collapsed on the enemy's head. From the ceiling shapes came down firing weapons and smashing the enemy with their limbs. Within seconds the pressure on Sahib and his people lessened, and they started pushing the enemy back as more and more shapes came down from the ceiling. Within minutes the enemy was dead, and two dozen shapes stood in front of Sahib and his squad.

One of the shapes moved towards them, and Sahib could see that it was shaped like a Guxcacul. Only it appeared that this Guxcacul was dressed in a full body armor. Sahib glanced at Riss who was studying the newcomers.

"I thought that you Guxcacul didn't like full body armor?" Sahib asked.

"Things have obviously changed." Riss answered.

The figure stopped in front of Riss and spoke in a series of chirps and clicks. Riss responded in kind, after a quick exchanged turned to Sahib.

"He said – Welcome, friends."

Chapter Twenty Eight

March; Year 32 – Sanctuary

Tomas sat in an almost empty meeting room, the only people inside were him and the Hand. The agent of the Hand looked like any other, except that Tomas could tell that this one was female. It didn't really matter, every agent spoke for the whole. The agent was here at Tomas's request. Tomas had done some drastic things in the last year, and he wanted to ask the Hand's input on a few things.

"Why have you called on us?" A highly modulated voice said.

"I have a few things that I want to talk to you about. The first is about your stance on the direction that I took the Empire in this last year." Tomas said.

"We have no problem with your foreign policies and actions. We have been created as a check upon your power, to protect the citizens of the Empire. You have not abused your followers, and your actions concerning the Sowir, Furvor, and the Trivax, have all been in the interest of protecting your people and the innocent." The agent said.

Tomas relaxed, he maybe better than anyone knew the pits that power could one into. He needed the Hand to stand as a reminder to him that he was never to use his power for self-interest or in a way that would harm his people.

"Trivax… I wanted to speak with you about that too. I have already spoken with the other Clan Leaders. But I wanted your opinion as well. They have asked to join the Empire, I was wondering what your thoughts on that are?" Tomas said.

The agent didn't respond for a while, apparently thinking about the answer. "That decision is for the people and you to make. If you do decide to allow them to join, it must be done slowly and handled carefully. The Trivaxian's have not been in the space for long, and they had only two contacts with other races, one of which lead to the deaths of many of their people. It will be difficult for them to put the resentment aside. And you already know that their ways cannot survive if they are to join us."

Tomas nodded slowly, he knew the history of Earth countries and kingdoms all too well. When one force conquered another or when two different factions joined together, the unions never lasted long. Difference of beliefs and the ways of thinking always bred ill will and resentment. In the end rebellions or uprisings happened. And Tomas had done a lot to prevent that happening to his Empire. He knew that if the Empire was to grow, he would need to allow other races to join. But he also knew that those that joined needed to completely become a part of the Empire.

That is why he had already decided to be very picky about who he let in the Empire.

"Thank you. That is all that I wanted to speak about."

The agent nodded her head, stood up and left the room. Leaving Tomas alone with his thoughts and decisions.

* * *

Seo-yun and Laura sat in a room at the Research and Development's main building, on one of the walls a large screen showed a direct feed to the cell occupied with one of the Sowir prisoners.

She – and they were positive that it was a she, although there was no physical difference – was just in the process of waking up. Seo-yun's people had placed a Sowir translating device inside the cell, hoping to establish some kind of communication with them. As the Sowir slowly woke she became aware of the device. She looked at it for a while and then stepped up to it and placed its body inside, then attached some kind of a band on her head. A few moments later a voice speaking in Nel started coming out of the device.

"*You wish to communicate?*" She said.

Seo-yun looked at Laura. "I guess that it works."

Laura approached turned the on the comm that will transfer her voice to the cell and translate it into Nel.

"Yes." Laura said.

"*Then speak your mind.*" The Sowir said.

Laura steeled herself and spoke. "Why are you doing this? Why are you attacking other races? How can you justify killing other intelligent life?"

"*There is no need for justification, we are not killing intelligent life.*"

Confused Laura exchanged looks with Seo-yun. "What do you mean? We are an intelligent race."

"*That is false, you are blind/deaf/senseless – you cannot be intelligent.*" The Sowir said.

Seo-yun leaned forward and spoke. "What do you mean blind?"

"*You cannot see/hear/sense the Spirit of the Universe. You cannot communicate other than by primitive, animalistic ways.*"

Seo-yun turned to Laura muted the comm and whispered, "Does she mean telepathy?"

"Maybe… But why would that be a reason for them to kill other races?" Laura asked.

"It could be their belief is that the only beings that are truly intelligent are telepathic." Seo-yun suggested.

Laura unmuted the comm. “You believe that we are not intelligent because we do not have your ability to speak mind to mind?”

“*That question only proves your unworthiness and ignorance. Communication between minds is only one of the things that makes us superior/intelligent. You cannot hear/see/sense the Universe around you, you are ignorant of its true form and that makes you no better than the animals that live their lives in ignorance of higher understanding.*” The Sowir said.

“But we have technologies that are far ahead of yours, how does that make us primitive and ignorant?” Seo-yun asked.

“*Again, your ignorance shows, there is a difference between intelligence and* ***intelligence.***”

Laura and Seo-yun frowned, and muted the comm again.

“I don’t think that these translations are perfect, there must be something lost in translation.” Seo-yun said.

“I agree. But still could the reason they are wiping out other races truly be because they don’t have telepathy?” Laura asked.

“Humans went to war for far stupider things.” Seo-yun added. Laura nodded and turned the comm back on.

“Is there any chance of peace between us?” Laura asked.

“*The universe belongs to those who can see/hear/sense its true form. Your knowledge and tenacity makes you a threat to the true beings. There can only be the peace of oblivion.*” Sowir said.

Laura sighed and muted the comm again.

“Well, I guess that just confirmed that we can’t trust them to keep their word to us. They think of us as animals, they believe us inferior.” Laura said.

“There must be something that we are missing. We need to keep talking with them, and see if we can take the translating device and improve it.” Seo-yun said.

“Good luck with that. I on the other hand have to fight and win a war against them, so anything that can help me do that will be appreciated.”

“I’ll send you anything of value that we learn.” Seo-yun said. Laura nodded and left the room, leaving Seo-yun to ponder on ways to improve the alien translation device.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Sanctuary

Tomas sat in yet another meeting with his closest advisers, Seo-yun, Laura, Jack, and Nadia.

“I have decided to allow the Trivaxian’s into the Empire, if they fulfill all the demands that we will make of them.” Tomas said.

“And what are those demands?” Nadia asked.

“That is what we need to decide. I am certain that they need to learn to standard, I believe that their mouths can recreate the sounds, but their understanding is more important than speaking. The second is that they need to submit their children to the Empire educational standards. And I think that they need to accomplish a few additional tasks, like building a viable colony and reworking their economy. I wanted to see if you had any other ideas.” Tomas said.

“We need to put them into our schools like you said, but not just the children. All of them need to be reeducated.” Nadia said.

“I think that we need to put them through an acclimation period, or something like that. A few years at least, where we introduce technologies slowly and push them to change their society.” Jack said.

“What about the immortality treatment?” Seo-yun asked.

”We will of course start the development of immortality treatment for them, but they won’t get it until they join as a full member.” Tomas answered.

“Are you planning on making them a Clan or split them up into several?” Nadia asked.

“Definitely a Clan.” Tomas said.

“Alright, I will draw out the documents outlining what we want from them before we allow them to join, and get it to you for review before sending it to them.” Nadia said.

“Thank you Nadia.” Tomas said. Then turned to Jack and Laura. “How secure are our acquisitions in the Sowir territory?”

Laura answered first. “On the space side, we have things under control. We monitor almost all of the neighboring systems so if they decide to counter attack, we will have enough time to move our ships via trans-space. The systems are under our control.”

Tomas nodded and turned to Jack. “The situation on the ground is a bit complicated… We have control of some of their stations and shipyards, but we are still doing sweeps for hidden enemy troops. The planet in Laraska is definitely not under our control, we only have footholds for future actions. It will be years before we get the entire planet under control.”

Tomas looked thoughtful before speaking. “What do you think

about us sending noncombatants to the stations and shipyards that we control? I would like to start upgrading and exploiting the industry we captured."

Jack grimaced. "We can start with the stations that are cleared. But I would wait a bit on the shipyards, we are still finding hostiles left behind and hidden. Let's wait a few more months until we are sure that we have cleared everything."

Tomas nodded and with that ended the meeting, letting his people get back to work.

* * *

Seo-yun found Tomas standing in the library, looking out of the window at the Olympus city. She walked over to stand next to him and put one hand around him. For a while they just stood there watching the Sun set on their city.

Then after a while Tomas spoke. "Sometimes I wake up, and for just a moment I feel as if all of this was a dream. I think that I must be back on Earth, and my desire to take humanity to the stars had created all of this in my head. And then when it doesn't slip away from me, when I get up and look through a window, I realize that it isn't a dream. That I have done what I have always wanted to do. Humanity among the stars. Only it isn't quite like what I imagined it as a child." He said softly.

"You saved us you know." Seo-yun said.

Tomas's lip curled upwards. "I doubt that. I just followed my dream."

"No. If it weren't for you and for Olympus. Humanity would never have left Earth. We would have been fractured, fighting wars among ourselves. And we would have all been slaves to the Ra'a'zani. You saved humanity."

Tomas smiled sadly, his hand rising to his chest in a Nel gesture of acceptance. "So many people gave their lives for us to reach this." He pointed at the city. "It took us so long to unite, to turn to the stars, and here we only found more of the things that we tried to get away from. Wars and senseless killings."

"Well, then it is up to us to change all that. That is what you want for us?" She asked.

Tomas turned to her with a determined look on his face. "Yes. And that is what we will become. Even if we have to fight and conquer the entire galaxy. One day I will see peace among the stars."

Seo-yun turned and pulled his head down for a long kiss. Then after she pulled back, she looked him intently in the eyes. "We will see

it together."

* * *

Two days later

After two months of being prodded and tested and monitored, then forced to speak with three different shrinks and two xenologists, Adrian was finally released from the hospital. No one could find anything wrong with him, aside from the whole new brain thing. Which they still couldn't explain.

The first place that Adrian, Akash, and Sora visited was the Research and Development, to see Iris. He was informed that they had made progress on her core, and Adrian wanted to be there in person to see what exactly they had done.

Once they got there they were greeted by Seo-yun who enveloped Adrian in a big hug which he returned.

"I'm so glad that you are alright Adrian." She said once she let him go.

"Thank you." Adrian responded warmly. He had always liked Seo-yun, she was probably the smartest person he knew, but also one of the most approachable.

"And hello to you too." Seo-yun said and patted the two wolions on their heads. She didn't even need to bend to reach their heads because of her shortness and their big size.

"So, have you made any progress with Iris?" Adrian asked hesitantly.

Seo-yun smiled and led Adrian through the complex, while she kept silent. Adrian's first reaction was to panic, but as Sora and Akash relayed Seo-yun's emotions to him – which he somehow felt much more clearly now – he relaxed.

Finally they arrived at their destination and Seo-yun led him inside a small room. Inside it looked like an office, and after a few glances around Adrian realized that it was Seo-yun's.

She walked to her desk and retrieved an item that was sitting on her desk, she turned and handed it to Adrian.

Turning it over, Adrian recognized it as a slender wrist unit that looked very reminiscent of the units that Nel used before they joined the Empire. He looked it over noticing the sleek and intricate fire design etched and color across it. It was also a bit longer than the Nel units, about the size of half his forearm.

"What is this?" He asked.

"Put it on." Seo-yun said grinning.

Adrian wanted to ask questions but Seo-yun's emotions made him

do as she asked. He put the wrist unit on his left arm. Immediately the wrist unit's lights turned on and the air in front of Adrian shimmered. Then a shape appeared standing there in the air.

"So, how do you like my new look?" A reddish fiery shape of a woman dressed in a long flowing dress asked.

"Iris!?" Adrian said surprised, but also relieved.

"Who else?" She said and did spin around herself.

"But what? I mean how?" He said turning to look at Seo-yun.

"We managed to save her core, but because of what happened to you we couldn't give you an implant and have her inside your head again. And as Iris refused to be anywhere but by your side, we designed that." She said pointing at Adrian's arm.

Adrian turned his sights to the fiery shape of Iris, which was about the size of his forearm and floating in front of his face.

"Are you alright Iris?" Adrian asked.

"Never better!" She said amusingly.

"But how are you…?" Adrian started to ask, but Seo-yun interjected and answered.

"The wrist unit contains Iris's core, a processor, and a computer similar to the implants. But it is also a holographic projector. It can project any hologram in the two meter radius around you. Since you can no longer have an implant, and as it is almost essential to life in the Empire, that will serve as a replacement."

Adrian turned his gaze to the unit on his arm, and then back at Seo-yun as she continued speaking.

"It won't have a connection to your brain, but it can do everything that your implant could and more. But it will be Iris that will use it to help you in your day to day activities." She then turned to Iris. "If you can please demonstrate for us Iris."

"Of course!" Iris exclaimed happily. And then reports started popping up in the air in front of Adrian, then a list of Adrian's comm contacts appeared, then images, the net search bar. And when the area around him was filled with holo windows it all cleared, and Iris stood there looking smug.

"That was amazing Iris." Adrian said, then turned to Seo-yun. He stepped closer and embraced her tightly, catching the shorter woman off guard. "Thank you Seo-yun." He whispered.

Seo-yun returned the embrace. "You're welcome Adrian."

After a few more moments Adrian released her and stepped back.

"Alright, now there are a few things that I need to teach you about the wrist unit, just let me get a data chip." She said and turned to walk to her desk.

Adrian looked Iris relieved, he couldn't have imagined a life without Iris. He might not have her voice in his head anymore, but

she was still present in his life. Finally for the first time since he woke up, he allowed himself to relax completely. All the worry about what happened to him and about Iris eased out of him. He finally felt at peace.

Seo-yun turned from her desk and walked back with a data chip in her palm. As she was walking towards him, Adrian noticed a ringing in his head. Focusing on it he realized that it had been there for a while, since he entered the building perhaps. His thoughts were just preoccupied with Iris for him to notice. The ringing wasn't painful, but it was annoying. And now that he was focused on it, the ringing seemed to grow in intensity.

Adrian looked and realized that Seo-yun was speaking, and looking at him strangely.

"Are you alright Adrian? You zoned out there for a few seconds." She asked worried.

Adrian frowned, "Do you hear a ringing?"

"A ringing?" Seo-yun asked, her expression getting even more worried.

Adrian focused on it and realized that he could tell the direction it was coming from. "A ringing, it is coming from there." He said pointing at the floor.

"I don't hear anything Adrian. And there is nothing there." She said glancing at the empty floor and then back at him. Iris too moved in front of Adrian's face, her holographic expression worried.

"Maybe we should get you back to the hospital Adrian." Iris said.

"No. I don't mean the floor. Beneath it, there is something down there." Adrian said, his mind going into overdrive. He was certain that he now had the exact direction of the source of the ringing. He looked back at Seo-yun. "Do you have something beneath us?" He asked.

"There is nothing Adrian, we really should get you back to the hosp—" She stopped mid-sentence, a look of realization came across her face, then her eyes glossed over in a way that they did when someone used their implant. "Point exactly at where you think the source of the ringing is."

Adrian turned and pointed with his finger at a spot on the floor. Seo-yun watched the direction of his finger, and then looked at the floor. Her mouth opened wide, and she grabbed Adrian's arm pulling him out of the room. "Follow me!" Sora and Akash followed closely behind.

She led him down a corridor and to a lift, taking them down to the last floor. Immediately after the doors opened, she rushed down a hallway with Adrian and his wolions following behind. They passed people who looked with surprised expressions at Adrian and the two beasts. With every step they took, Adrian felt the ringing grow just a

bit stronger.

Finally they reached a locked door, and Seo-yun placed her hand on the display close to it. A few moments later the door opened and they entered another hallway. At the end of that long hallway was another locked door. Here Seo-yun placed her face in front of another display with a scanning light passing over her face. After a moment the display flashed green and letters appeared on the display, a moment later a series of symbols and numbers appeared and the door opened.

They entered into a well lit room, with a holo-table and a pedestal in the middle of the room. Immediately Adrian recognized the object on the pedestal, it was the sphere that Jusan brought from Nelus. Seo-yun stepped to the side as Adrian took a few steps to stand in front of the pedestal. Now when he was so close to the source of the ringing, Adrian could feel it like a tangible thing in his mind. Not really knowing what he was doing, he focused his thought on the ringing, and pushed.

The next moment blue lines of light appeared in the sphere and a hologram of Axull Darr appeared floating above it. The image of the ancient ancestor of the human and Nel race turned his gaze towards Adrian and spoke.

“Finally, the beacon has been heard and answered.”

Epilogue

Eighteen years later – Former Ra'a'zani space

Anessa – Dai Sha of the Shara Daim, walked the ground of her enemies' world. The Ra'a'zani on this world had all been killed. Like the ones on every world they had encountered. The only ones who remained were the slaves that Ra'a'zani held. The Shara Daim didn't take slaves, they abhorred weakness. And these weaklings had let themselves be enslaved, and so in the eyes of the Shara Daim they didn't deserve to live. Anessa had ordered them killed along with the Ra'a'zani.

A soldier under Anessa's command approached as she gazed at the ruins of the Ra'a'zani city, her helmet was retracted, revealing her obsidian colored skin, shaved head, and piercing black eyes with white iris surrounding a black pupil.

"Dai Sha." The soldier said, bowing. Anessa was the first among the Dai Sha, a master of war, and the Shur Sha had entrusted her with the duty of eradicating the Ra'a'zani for the crime they committed against her people. No soldier under her command would dare not show her the respect she was due.

Anessa turned to the soldier. "Report Do Sun."

"The slaves have been eradicated, Dai Sha."

"Good. Ready the legion, we are leaving this world." Anessa said. There were still more Ra'a'zani worlds left. Another three of their clans still lived. But the Shara Daim would reach them in time, there was nowhere that they could run that Anessa couldn't follow.

"There was one more thing Dai Sha." Do Sun said.

Anessa turned her face to look at him, and a shift occurred in her eyes. They changed from a single iris/pupil, to pure black with several white pupils that shifted constantly.

"What is it Do Sun?" Anessa asked.

"Our data mining of the Ra'a'zani computers uncovered something. A mention of a slave race from the clan Ooruvan. The images of these slaves are very similar to us." Do Sun said.

Upon hearing that, Anessa felt her entire body stiffen. "How much similar?" She asked slowly.

"Their body structure is exactly the same Dai Sha. Except that their skin has a wider range of color, from a dark color close to ours, to very pale." Do Sun said.

Dai Sha's mind processed the information quickly and efficiently. Everything that she knew about the faith and the lore came back to her in an instant. And then she remembered what the Ra'a'zani she had killed told her just before he died – ***Impossible… You are***

human… – the alien had mistaken her for another race. Could these slaves be the ones that the lore spoke of?

Dai Sha turned to Do Sun. “Focus all our efforts on finding more about these humans. I want to know everything about them, and most importantly the location of their home world.”

Do Sun bowed, even if he thought that the Dai Sha’s actions were strange he wouldn’t comment on them, it wasn’t his place to question one so high above himself. His was only to obey. He rose from his bow and turned to fulfill his orders.

Dai Sha looked at her retreating subordinate, her mind reeling from what this discovery could mean for the Shara Daim. Things would change, for another of the People had survived.

*** ***END*** ***

Book 5 of the “Rise of the Empire” series coming summer 2016

Contact the author: ivankalrote@gmail.com

If you liked the book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon.com

Other books in the series:

Olympus

Sanctuary

Out of the Ashes

Copyright

Copyright © 2014 by Ivan Kal
All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.